

Vizcaya

LINA RIVERA

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ISBN: 1469920360

ISBN-13: 978-1469920368

For Maika,
305

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

First, I would like to thank the lovely ladies of Latte Words: Lisa Wicks, Danuta Deeb, Joan Okun, and Tiffany Osburn. Your incredible feedback helped me make the story stronger and gave me the courage to take this leap.

To all my backers, without all of you this never would've happened. There are so many projects out there and I'm humbled that you chose mine to support. I hope you all end up loving this book that you helped to create.

To Sherrie Richey MD, thank you for your generosity and support.

To Edie Kindle, thank you for just "getting it." Now where are we going next?

To Franklin Ayers, thank you for sharing your amazing talent with this project.

To Tara McClendon, thank you for not making me cry with your edits. I probably should've had you edit these acknowledgments. I take full responsibility for any mistakes on this page.

To Anita Asher, Julie DeMeo-Pierce, Keren Hirsch, Loan Le, Evelisse Luciano, and Marleen Martinez; I need all of you to move closer to me. You guys have no idea how much I value your friendships, and I'm grateful for how much support you guys have given me with this project even from so far away. I miss you guys!

To Jessica Simmons, and to think that if we hadn't been sent to Columbia on that cold day in January, and if I hadn't been so unprofessional, and if we had never found Punchy, and we had never discovered Lucky/Xtra, then none of this may ever have happened. Whoa, this is heavy.

To the 202 Crew: Maika Chery, Natasha Ilunga, Troy Bear, and Zack Attack; there isn't enough space on this page for everything I need to say to you guys.

We're a pretty cool family and each year keeps getting better for us. I couldn't have done any of this without you guys and I hope you're prepared to do it again. We only go up, up.

And finally, to Mami, Roy, and Maria; you guys are always my biggest inspirations. This was able to happen because of your love and support. I hope this makes you guys proud.

1: VIZCAYA

Nikki

I forgot to do my Chem homework last night. That was a first for me because if there was anything in the world I had mastered, it was the art of making sure I got my homework done on time. I couldn't believe I forgot to do it. I woke up this morning and got dressed in my new peach-pink-leather skirt and my oh-my-god-I-can't-believe-it's-not-cashmere turtleneck. I blow-dried and twisted my long blond hair into a don't-be-jealous style that left it shiny and full of body. I was checking myself one more time in the mirror when I realized I forgot to do the assignment for school.

"Nikki," said my mother's voice from the hallway, "I'll be late coming home tonight so make sure and get yourself some dinner."

I opened the door and looked at my mother. She was digging through her purse, probably searching for her car keys. "Hey, Mom, I forgot to do my Chem homework."

"Tell your teacher that you'll turn it in late," she said as she left. The careless slam of the front door reverberated around the house. I stood still and considered this option. My Chem teacher was tough, but he was harder on the kids who never tried. I tried. I tried harder than anyone else in that class.

I grabbed my peach-colored oversized purse, which doubled as a schoolbag, and checked that it had all the essentials: Hello Kitty notebooks; multi-colored Gel-tastic pens in every pastel shade available; my sunglasses;

my school-issued homework planner; a pack of gum; my pink cell phone; and, most importantly, my lip-smacking berry berry strawberry flavored lip gloss. Using the house key that I kept on a long silver chain around my neck, I locked the door.

I didn't walk down the sidewalk to the bus stop—I strutted. That wasn't my fault. I had been born with my strut. My head was always held high, my chest was always pushed out, and my tall legs carried themselves in a quick, but confident, stride that had nothing to do with me.

The air was a bit muggy, and I could sense the sea salt lift up from the ocean and frolic around the neighborhood. It was Miami in October, and things were starting to get cool, but not cool enough to complain about it being cold.

“Hey, Nikki,” said Elvis. Elvis was a fellow sophomore and lived three houses from me. Unlike the obvious assumption that he was named after Elvis Presley, his real name was Edgar. He had gotten his nickname a few years ago when he auditioned for a Latin boy band. He had selected a song by the Puerto Rican merengue singer Elvis Crespo. Although his voice was flawless, I could've told him he wasn't going to make it based on his looks alone. Elvis didn't look like a Latin boy band member. He looked more like a Latin Bill Gates.

“Hey, Elvis.”

“You look really nice today.”

“Thanks, Elvis.”

“You look so nice that I think you should let me take pictures of you today after school.”

I gave Elvis the kind of look that any self-respecting girl gives a guy who stares at her chest instead of her face when she asks him a question. “I don't think so.”

“Not like that,” Elvis quickly covered. “You know, at Vizcaya, since we have to go for our project.”

Oh right. I had forgotten about that. First Chem and now Vizcaya? Where was my head? I had completely forgotten about the ridiculous art project. Whose idea was it to take art in the first place? Oh right—Diego's.

“Well, you know I'm always ready for my close up.” I tossed my hair and gave him a big toothpaste commercial grin.

Elvis got too excited and started talking about the kind of shots he wanted to take. He lost me at angles and lighting. I tuned him out and looked at my

cell phone to see if Diego had called me. Who was I kidding? Diego probably wasn't even up yet.

Diego

Whenever I looked in the mirror, I always saw my dad. Straight hair that fell in short spikes like pine needles overhanging a branch. Sharp turquoise-water eyes that were gem-like and unnatural peeked out from under full eyebrows. His hawkish nose, his subtle jaw line, and his olive skin that turned bronze in the glare of the Miami sun. It was never me in the mirror, always him, always the one man that I had never seen with my own eyes.

I rinsed out the toothpaste that was in my mouth and turned the water off before I took one last look at myself. My mother said that the best thing that ever happened to me was my dad leaving us. She never mentioned if this was the best thing that had ever happened to her too.

I threw on a navy-blue polo and some worn jeans and looked at the time. I was late to first, but that wasn't a surprise. They knew better than to expect me before third. I grabbed my backpack and slid my cell phone open to see several missed text messages from Nikki.

I had kissed Nikki over the summer at an illegal bonfire on the beach and we had been together ever since. I didn't mind when she got on my case about things like being late or not doing my homework. I liked that someone was around to help me do whatever was expected of me. She was probably the only reason I bothered to show up to school at all.

I strolled into the kitchen to get a Pop-Tart and found a note from my mother saying that she'd be staying at Chris's place. Chris was her boyfriend, and he had never been over to the house. My mother was like that. She would never do anything that made her look bad in front of me, and somehow she thought that this would make her look bad. I couldn't even judge if I liked the guy or not because she kept him far away. Maybe she hoped that if I didn't see him, then I wouldn't think he existed. That hadn't worked with my dad, and it wasn't about to work with her boyfriend either.

"Hi, Diego," said our neighbor, Mr. Alvarez. He was an older man, maybe in his sixties, and he had a wife and lots of children who liked to visit with their lots of grandchildren. He was finishing up watering his lawn, making sure to get it done before the hot sun torched the water into nonexistent gases.

“Hey, Mr. Alvarez.”

“You’re late again? Let me drive you.” He started rolling up the garden hose into a precise coil.

Mr. Alvarez liked to assume the role of father to me. He knew my mother worked all day and rarely came home at night, and somehow he had gotten it into his head that I needed a guardian. “I’m alright. I’m catching the bus.”

“That will take too long.”

“I’m already late; it won’t matter.” I walked quickly so that Mr. Alvarez didn’t have time to go into motion and talk me out of it. I liked taking the city bus. Every now and then, I’d get off before school, and sometimes, I’d stay on it after it passed the school. When I skipped, I usually liked to go down to the beach and draw the people playing on the shore. Occasionally, I went to my cousin’s house to shoot some hoops. Billy always had an article to write for some magazine, but he loved to procrastinate just as much as I did. Today, I got off at the school stop and signed myself in.

“Tardy again, Diego?” the front office secretary said as she pushed the clipboard toward me.

There was no point in answering the obvious. I signed the tardy log and took the pass she gave me. As I walked toward what was left of my second period class, I got a text message from Nikki. I slid my phone open again to read what it said: *u here yet?* I texted her back.

Nelli

The dress was indicative of autumn. The copper gown had a burnt orange overlay that helped the satin shine against the contrasting piece. It made my naturally tan skin glow, my brown eyes glisten, and my long black curls shine against the warm hues. Mami had paid a seamstress a lot of money to make this dress. It was a “one of a kind,” designed by me and Mami, and it fit my body perfectly. I had waited fifteen years for this moment, for this chance to parade around the Vizcaya gardens in my beautiful Quinceañera dress. I always felt like a princess, but today was the day that I finally got to play the part.

The photographer Mami had hired was a family friend who had shot celebrities for really big magazines like *Vanity Fair* and *Rolling Stone*. Today I was the celebrity. I stood by the gazebo with Biscayne Bay as the backdrop. Sunshine filled the sky, and the water reflected the blue of the heavens. The

marble breakwater sat to the left of me, offsetting the otherwise monotonous seascape.

I worried for a moment that my autumn dress would clash with what appeared to be a perfect summer day, but I knew that the photographer would make it work. That was his job after all. Mami fussed over the dress and knelt down to place it so that everything about the picture would be flawless. I put my hand on my hip to prepare my pose as Mami stood and fixed my curls so they draped over my shoulder in a way she had probably seen in the fashion magazines she subscribed to.

The photographer liked to say kind and encouraging things like, “You look beautiful, you have a face the camera loves, turn a little to the side, that’s it, it’s perfect.” I always followed instructions well. Plus, this hadn’t been the first time I had posed for professional pictures. When I was nine years old, Mami took me to an audition for a Latin sitcom that was filming in Miami. I got the part and sat in for several photo shoots worth of promotion. Unfortunately, the sitcom never aired.

Papi was standing behind the photographer, talking on his cell phone. He was always taking important business calls. “How many pictures do we need of her in front of the water?”

“We can’t waste this view while the sun is cooperating,” Mami inspected my face to see if any of the lipstick or mascara needed reapplying.

The sun was cooperating a little too much. I could feel the heat soak through my scalp. My dark hair was like a sponge for the sun’s rays. There was only a light breeze coming off the bay to help matters.

“It would probably go quicker if you stopped primping her after every shot,” Papi said. He probably wanted to get out of the sun’s rays, as well. “She looks perfect. Just let the man do his job so we can hurry this up.”

“Hurry this up?” Mami said with indignation. “This is one of the most important moments of your daughter’s life and you want to hurry it up?”

My parents always did this. They used me as an excuse to fight about things. They liked to fight—it’s what kept their marriage going.

When the view of the bay was exhausted, we finally moved to the gardens on the grounds. I walked with my hands hoisting the skirt of my dress, afraid that it would get scratched against the rough stones of the archways and gates that led to the fountains between the main villa and the large mound that served as the grand highlight of the gardens.

I was not the only girl having my picture taken today. It was traditional for many girls to take their “Quince” pictures here. While I kept my mouth shut, Mami had no problem comparing their dresses to mine.

“It’s ill fitted on that girl. She went traditional, how boring. I can’t believe her mother paid for that dress.” And on the criticisms came.

Young girls playing the part of princesses for the day weren’t the only people who were there posing for photographs. There were many tourists, of course, and many locals as well, enjoying a calm October afternoon and being inspired by the lavishness of the grounds. I passed by a blonde in a peach skirt as she pretended to look studious for a boy who was entertaining himself by eagerly photographing her. The girl looked up at me and for a split second we made eye contact. Then she looked back down at her sketchbook and I walked straight ahead.

“In front of the fountain,” Mami said, “Before that girl gets over here.” That girl was another Quince girl in a light blue gown that looked like a poufy, dyed wedding dress. I quickly stood before the fountain, and Papi paced behind the photographer as he spoke firmly to whomever was on the other line.

Once again, Mami fixed my dress and my hair, and I posed in a contemplative form, then with my head bowed, then looking off to the side, then looking straight ahead where I made eye contact once again. Only this time, I stared at a boy around my age in jeans and a T-shirt. He was seated on the steps of the south façade of the villa, drawing in a sketchbook, and his eyes were the color of Biscayne Bay.

Diego

This wasn’t the first time I had sketched Vizcaya. Several art camps and summer art programs made it a point to bring us here, and over the course of my fifteen years, I had managed to document the gardens and architecture with my pens, pencils, charcoals, and chalk. Today I was focusing on the perspective of the fountain that converged to the concrete mound. I had drawn this many times before, but I never felt that I had drawn it in a way that meant anything or brought anything to the image. Nikki said I was just a perfectionist, but she didn’t understand that anyone could draw this scene. I wanted to draw it in a way that was special.

VIZCAYA

Nikki was on a bench by one of the gates, having chosen to focus her drawing on one of the many Roman statues that lined the fountain garden. Elvis was foregoing drawing for an impromptu photo shoot. I already knew that Elvis would be nice enough to give me some pictures without my asking, but he'd keep his favorite one just for himself.

Many people passed in front of my line of sight, but they didn't distract me from the overall composition. I had this view memorized. Maybe that's why I was startled by the girl who stood there now, in front of the fountain. She pretended to look away in thought. Many girls in gaudy and over-exaggerated dresses had stopped there to take pictures, but none of them looked like this. Most of the girls carried themselves in a way that made it obvious that this was a special moment, something they would only do once in their lifetime. This girl carried herself in a way that made it seem like this happened all the time. Of course she'd be wearing a dress like this for a photo shoot. Of course she belonged in the pristine gardens and in the villa inspired by Italy. Of course she'd be on the bay that had a coveted view for so little of the residents of this city. At that moment, this girl *was* Vizcaya.

I quickly turned the page of my sketchbook and began rendering her. Her body was trim, and her curves subtle but evident. Her dress draped her body, creating a seamless form of a young woman with a small waist and ideally proportioned hips. Her hair was magnetic as it captured each ray of the sun, causing the black to have various shades of shine and luster. Her face was soft and round. Her brown eyes were narrow, and her nose was proportionate to the overall structure of her face. It was easier to draw her features than the dress, and I quickly sketched the latter while trying to have my fingers deftly document as much of her natural attributes as possible.

When the shoot was done, she walked in my direction with her entourage. She delicately lifted the skirt of the dress as she walked up the steps. I did not break my gaze on her as I watched her move closer. Our eyes locked as she reached the steps on which I sat. She glanced down to my lap where she saw the sketch I had made.

Her eyes narrowed even more, and then she looked at me. "Did you draw me?" She had a strong voice. I had been expecting her voice to be soft like the gardens where she posed.

"I did," I answered.

"Who said you could draw me?"

"Who said you could pose for me in front of my gardenscape?"

"I don't see a garden in that drawing."

I turned the page back to my garden drawing for her benefit.

“Happy birthday by the way.” It was obvious that was what the photos were for.

“Thanks, it’s not until Friday,” she said, “But my actual party is on Saturday.”

“Nelli,” the woman that had just caught up to her said.

I judged by the matching dark hair, matching narrow eyes, and slightly older countenance that this was her mother. “*Apúrate*, we don’t have much time before the sun starts going down.”

“I have to go,” Nelli said.

“I’ll be here,” I said.

She looked at me unsure of how to respond to that and then turned to follow her mom up the rest of the stairs. I looked down at the sketch and then back toward my view that now seemed empty. I tried to focus on turning my attention back to depicting the garden, but now my vision of it had been shattered. I couldn’t visualize it anymore without her standing there.

I waited patiently for her to pass beside me again. When she did, she hunched down and took my pencil out of my hand then wrote her name and email address on the picture.

“Nelli,” I observed, “with an *i*.”

“It’s short for Minnelli,” she said holding out the pencil firmly for me to take back from her. “Like Liza.”

“Who’s Liza?”

“It doesn’t matter,” she said. “My Quince is on Saturday, but my friends are throwing me a huge after party. You should be there. What’s your name?”

“His name is Diego,” Nikki said, and I wondered when she had approached and how much she had overheard. Nikki hunched down on the other side of me and looked directly at Nelli, “You don’t mind if I come along do you?”

Nelli looked at me, waiting for an explanation.

“This is my girlfriend Nikki,” I provided. “Nikki, this is Nelli.”

“Nice to meet you,” Nelli said to Nikki without missing a beat. “Of course you can come. The more the better, right? Just email me and I’ll give you the info.” Nelli got up and went down the steps to meet with the photographer.

I looked down at the drawing and then at Nikki who looked at the drawing, as well.

“I’m ready when you are,” Nikki said standing up. Elvis ran up the steps to meet us, as if afraid that the caravan would leave without him. I stood up

as well and took one last look at Nelli in front of the fountain. She didn't look my way again.

Nikki

Diego always reminded me of those commercials where the guy would spritz on some cologne and girls would look and fall out of their chairs as he walked by. Only Diego didn't need any spritzing to make this happen. I've known Diego since middle school and became his friend because I was the only girl who seemed to be able to speak around him. The other girls tended to become silent and turn around to their friends when he walked by only to oh-my-God-squeal-and-eek.

"Wanna get off at the next stop to get food?" Diego said on the bus. I shook my head. It was a formality on his part. I knew that he wanted to get home so he could lock himself in his room and draw "Nelli" to his heart's content. What kind of a name was Nelli anyway?

"Are you really going to email her and go to this party?" Yes, Nikki. Yes he was.

"Maybe. You wanna go?"

No, I didn't want to go. "Sure, we can go. She looked pretty loaded. I bet she lives on Star Island or something."

"I guess we'll find out."

I opened my school planner and wrote Nelli's name on Saturday's square with my fluffy-top, purple pen. My planner only had school-related things in it, so it was kind of nice to put something in it that pertained to the outside world. I usually didn't remember that it existed.

"Can I come, too?" Elvis asked. He turned to face us from the row in front of us.

"Sure," I said before Diego could answer. "She did say the more the better."

"Can I tell my mom that I'm staying at your house?" Elvis tried with a puppy-dog look.

I shook my head knowing that Diego was smirking by my side.

"But that's the only excuse that may work. She won't let me go to a party if I don't lie to her."

"Sorry, Elvis," I said.

“You could tell her that you’re staying at my house,” Diego offered but Elvis looked resigned.

“She would never let me stay with you. She thinks you’re a bad influence.”

I laughed, and Diego poked me on the side, which caused me to laugh more. Elvis looked amused, which made me feel better about not covering for him. It would just take one paranoid phone call from his mom to mine to incriminate us both.

As the bus ride continued and the piss smell of the humid seats behind us began to make me nauseous, I caught Diego glancing at his drawing of Nelli. The potholes, sharp turns, and abrupt starts and stops couldn’t distract him from looking at her image, nor could they distract me from looking at him looking at her image.

Diego had drawn me only once before, and that was because I had asked him to. I had wanted to give a drawing of me to my mom for Mother’s Day one year and Diego had done an exact rendering of each and every feature I had to offer. It was a great drawing. My mom had it framed and kept it in her bedroom.

Diego had never asked to draw me again, and he had never asked for a replica of the drawing. It was apparent now that he had never looked at me quite in the way he looked at her. I know that Diego felt our relationship was casual, but he was the only boy I had eyes for. I had never really thought that someone would come along and make me think that the feeling wasn’t mutual. At that moment I knew that our love story fell apart when he saw her. But then again, maybe that’s when it really began.

2: FIFTEEN

Nikki

Nelli didn't live on Star Island. She lived in Coconut Grove not far from where we had met her at Vizcaya. The party was being thrown north of there in a way-up-high-sea-seeing-larger-than-life condo in Bal Harbour. Penthouse suite, of course.

Diego and I were fishes out of water. It was like we had walked into a movie where people were taking on stereotypical roles of what they were supposed to be doing at this kind of party, but I still wasn't sure what kind of party it was. I sat beside the wall of windows that looked at the pitch black Atlantic and I made out the Pegasus constellation. It was hard to see the stars in Miami, but if you knew where to look, the images could make themselves visible. The view helped me to avoid the girls inspecting Diego from afar. They were mentally wondering who he was, what school he went to, and why they had never seen him before.

"I'll get you a drink," Diego said.

"I just want a soda."

Diego went to find me one, and I watched him blend into the crowd of the spoiled and privileged teenagers that made up Nelli's peers. Nelli was nowhere to be seen. I crossed my legs as I waited and smoothed my black leather pants. I had paired them with a rose-colored cami and some black pumps that had given Diego a mischievous look when he'd seen them. I looked great, but so did all the kids around me.

“Here you go,” Diego said, handing me a cup of soda. “I poured it myself,” he assured me.

I took a drink and made some room for him to sit beside me. We were on a ledge-turned-sitting area lined with black velvet pillows. If we lay down, we could stare at the endless night sky.

“Nelli said this was her friend’s place. He’s a music producer.”

“Why would a music producer live in a condo?” I took a sip of my drink. The soda was sweet and reassuring, and I let my tongue play with the circular pieces of ice each time I went to take a drink.

“Why wouldn’t he?”

“It doesn’t make sense. If I was a producer I’d live in a house, so when I’m working on music I wouldn’t have to worry about bothering the neighbors.”

“He’s practically got the whole floor.”

“There are people underneath him.”

Nelli’s arrival interrupted our conversation. She was wearing a super short, but not skin tight, black dress that made her look elegant, fun, youthful, and ready for anything. Her black curls were back in a messy pony tail crowned by the tiara sitting perfectly in the center of her head. Her heels went for days, her silver bracelets sparkled and tinkled, and her diamond necklace stood out against her tan chest.

I didn’t look at Diego because I didn’t want to see the look on his face now that he had also seen her. I had to admire Nelli’s effortless sense of style and general being. It had taken me years to perfect my own, but she seemed to have been born with it.

Nelli glided among the crowd. She had a cup in her hand that she took frequent sips of, and the boys in the room took turns going up to her, flirting with her, or just trying to make sure she noticed them. The girls looked turned off by the whole display, but they put fake smiles on their faces and took turns filling her in on the latest gossip around the party. Well the gossip that didn’t include her. The idea that these girls were supposed to be her friends, yet were obviously being fake about it made me feel a little bad for Nelli. Only a little.

“We should say hi,” Diego said.

“Do what you want,” I said as I looked back out at Pegasus.

Diego

I didn't really want to say hi to her. I just wanted to keep looking at her. People would think that it was purely aesthetic or superficial, but it was something more innate. There was something about her, something inside of her that I was attracted to. Just like Nikki. I watched Nelli make her way in our direction. As soon as she saw us, she came over almost with a look of relief.

"You made it." Her brown eyes were bright as if they weren't looking at whatever was in front of her but instead at something greater and far away, "Are you having fun?"

"We just got here," I said. "Nikki doesn't understand why a music producer would live in a condo when he has neighbors underneath."

I looked at Nikki with a smile and she turned her attention to the conversation. She hadn't been expecting to be included.

"He should live in a house," Nikki said.

"There's a loft," Nelli explained, and without much warning or indication, we were following her to another part of the condo, up a flight of stairs, and to a loft. She opened the door to show us what essentially was a magic room of music. It was large, well padded, and there were large boards of knobs and slides and buttons and lit up lights. It all seemed overwhelming and extremely complex.

"Do you sing?" Nikki asked her.

"I've had voice lessons," Nelli said. "I'm okay, but I'm not great."

"So how do you know a producer?" Nikki prodded. I loved how Nikki always wanted to know things. She had an unquenchable thirst for knowledge, and she was able to retain most of the information given to her. It was almost as if she had a system for organizing information in her brain and then retrieving it quickly when needed. My brain always felt empty next to hers.

"My dad," Nelli said, guarding herself and then lifting her cup. "I need a refill. Let's go."

Nikki gave me the look she gives me when she doesn't like or trust a situation. I let her know I understood, but then I ignored it as I followed Nelli back to the party. The music had gotten louder in our brief absence.

I blinked, and Nelli disappeared. One minute she was in front of me, and the next there were people dancing and laughing. Nelli was nowhere in sight. I got us more sodas and followed Nikki back to the window she had first sat

at, but now it was occupied by several girls who were checking their messages on their cell phones. Some were pretending to do so as they surreptitiously took pictures of the party with their camera phones.

“Let’s explore,” I said to Nikki, and she followed me through the penthouse.

The space was open wide, but occasionally there would be a room where the door would suddenly open as someone came out laughing or crying or talking loudly. I found a small room that seemed to be a small office. Since it was unoccupied, I took Nikki in it and shut the door.

“Sanctuary,” I joked.

Nikki looked thoughtful as she sat in the office chair and looked out the window again. “If I were Nelli’s dad, I would have a serious issue with someone I work with throwing my daughter a party like this.”

“Maybe he doesn’t know,” I suggested.

“Maybe he doesn’t,” she said back.

I started to try and look through some of the drawers, but they were locked. I moved my hand under the desk top to see if there was a latch or something to trip the lock. I found a small key and used that to open the top drawer. Nikki just watched me, intrigued.

The top drawer had nothing of value, some papers with random information about financial things that made no sense to me. The second drawer had some files, again with nothing that made sense. The third drawer, however, had a few things worth noting: a 10 millimeter caliber Glock pistol, two stacks of hundred dollar bills, and a framed picture of Nelli with a guy that looked old enough to be her dad. I knew it wasn’t her dad.

“Creepy,” Nikki said. “Think that’s the producer?”

“Probably,” I said. I didn’t touch a thing and locked the drawer back up, then replaced the key to where I had found it. “We should get back out there.”

“Yeah,” Nikki said. She got up from the chair, placing it back exactly where it had been, and then opened the door.

Nelli

I was officially fifteen. I had promised John that when I turned fifteen, I would let him kiss me. Now I was walking around my party avoiding him so that I didn’t have to. I had known John since elementary school, but I didn’t

like him like that. Brody asked me to dance, so I did that until I saw John out of the corner of my eye move in my direction. I disappeared behind Brody's broad shoulders and took off before either of them could figure out where I had gone. I joined Ezra and Danielle for a few shots and laughed at something they were saying about Lindsey's outfit.

"Stop avoiding me," came the voice in my ear.

I felt his hands on my arms and gave Ezra and Danielle a silent plea for help. They laughed, but they were wasted and couldn't interpret the look of frustration on my face.

"I'm not avoiding you." I turned to John and gave him a smile. "Take a shot with me."

John was sixteen and a year above me, but our families ran in the same social circles, so we knew each other better than that. He was blond and always had to flip his hair out of his eyes. When he was in eighth grade, he had shaved his head. He'd also carved his name into his arm with one of the knives in his mother's kitchen. He had been going through some things, so his parents sent him somewhere.

When he came back, his hair was its normal length and he suddenly became very cool at school. He started reading books that were banned and started questioning everything the teachers said. Most of the girls in school would carve their arms for him, but I wasn't one of them. This probably explained why I was the only girl at school that he wanted.

We took our shots, and he went in for his kiss. I wasn't ready, but it would've been rude to push him. He was a friend, and I wasn't going to embarrass him. When he pulled away I laughed and said, "There's your kiss. Happy?"

Ezra poured us more shots to celebrate the kiss.

"No," John said. "Next time I want you to kiss back."

He took his shot and walked away, and I stared at him while Danielle said, "That was hot."

My eyes must've blurred a bit because the back of John's head suddenly transformed into the face of Diego. I blinked a few times and then realized he was standing not too far from me and looking in my direction. I took my shot and walked over to him, but I must've not been really walking because the next thing I knew his arms were on mine and he was holding me steady.

"Oops, sorry," I said. What had I tripped on? I looked around me and then up to those blue eyes. Why did his eyes have to be so blue? They were so easy to stare at for long periods of time.

“You should sit,” he said. His voice was smooth and deep, like his eyes, but not so deep that it seemed out of place coming from a fifteen-year-old boy. Was he fifteen? I let him guide me and sat beside him on a chaise lounge that was in the hallway leading to the master bedroom.

I thanked him once I was sitting and looked at him again. Then I grabbed his neck and kissed him the way that John had wanted me to kiss him back. His lips were sweet with soda and soft and warm. I didn’t want to stop, nor did he.

He smelled like the heavy wind of a rain forest, and in my mind I could almost envision us doing this in a tropical surrounding. I didn’t want to pull away ever, but he did. I leaned in, desperately trying to find his lips again, but he kept his arm on mine to hold me away.

“Come to the room,” I said motioning toward the master bedroom.

He shook his head and said something about how I had drunk too much, how I wasn’t thinking straight. If only he knew how straight I was thinking right at that moment. He said he was going to get me some water, so I sat on the chaise lounge feeling alone like I often felt. It was my party, I was alone in the hallway, and there was no one in sight but me. No wait, someone was coming. It was John. John would pick up the pieces. John would make everything better.

Nikki

Pegasus was descending and I was stuck in a corner with a boy named Onyx who thought I was the most beautiful girl he had ever seen. I told him that when he woke up the next morning, he would think differently. I saw Diego come toward me with a confused expression as he ran his hand through his dark hair.

“What is it?” I asked as Onyx sized him up and down.

“I’m worried about Nelli.”

There are people who would think that my reaction should’ve been one of envy or oh-my-God-stop-obsessing-over-that-girl, but instead I jumped to my feet, which almost shook Onyx off his seat. Diego never worried about anything, so there had to be a reason he was concerned.

“Where’d you last see her?”

VIZCAYA

“In this hallway,” he said leading me to it. We turned the corner to an empty hall. He glanced at the double door at the end of the corridor and took off in a sprint. He twisted the knob. “Nelli. Open the door! Nelli!”

At first I thought that Diego might have been slightly overreacting, but then I heard Nelli inside saying something. Something hit the floor. Rapid footsteps neared us, and then the door opened. Nelli’s pony tail was gone, her tiara was tilted, her dress was unzipped, her heels were off, and there was a blond boy trying to get up from the floor. He was trying to zip up his pants.

An odd moment of what-the-hell-is-going-on-here passed between us. Diego looked at Nelli worried. Nelli looked at Diego, anticipating that he wanted to join her. I looked at Nelli wondering if she wanted to be left alone with the blond boy. The blond boy looked at Diego like he wanted to kill him.

“You okay?” Diego asked her.

“I’m okay,” Nelli said. “John’s a friend of mine.”

“I didn’t mean to interrupt,” Diego said, looking between Nelli and John.

“Just close the door, man,” John said.

Nelli laughed, then bit her lip and looked at me. Her eyes were not the eyes of someone who wanted to stay in there. In fact, her eyes were not the eyes of someone who wanted to be at this party at all.

“Diego and I were just going to find some ice cream,” I offered her. “Want to come along?”

Nelli’s eyes turned grateful, and she turned around to me. “Zip me up?”

I zipped up the back of her dress and told Diego to get her shoes for her. When we left the party, it was the three of us, and I knew that from that moment on, this was how things were going to be for awhile.

3: ENCANTADA

Nikki

Nelli looked through the contents of my closet and pulled things out whenever they looked appealing. “You have the best taste in clothes,” she said.

A week had passed since her party, and this marked the first time she had come to my house. Diego was supposed to come by later, and Elvis was curious to meet her but he hadn’t shown up yet.

“Thanks,” I said, knowing the strength of my closet. “I like what you wear, too.” Our styles were maybe a little similar.

“I have these same pants,” she said pulling out the leather ones I had worn to her party. “Mami got them for me in January.”

That would’ve been when they first came out. “I got them a few weeks ago,” I told her. That would’ve been when they had officially gone out of season. I had found these pants off rack, much to the dismay of another girl whose hand hit them a millisecond after mine. My tug was harder than hers, and the pants found their new home.

“The important thing is that you got them,” Nelli said. She kept looking through my pants.

In the week we had known her, we had learned that Nelli’s dad was a big executive at the biggest record company in the city. Her mom was a model turned trophy wife and socialite. We also learned that Nelli expected the finer things in life and was amused whenever we were amused by this.

“So what do you want to do once the boys get here?” I asked her. “We can watch a movie or play Monopoly.”

“What do you guys normally do for fun?” Nelli tried on one of my sweaters.

“Watch movies or play Monopoly.”

Nelli looked at me unsure and then took the sweater off and perfectly placed it back in its place. “That doesn’t sound like a lot of fun.”

“What do you and your friends do for fun?” I asked. I watched her move onto my tops.

“Lay out by the pool, or go shopping.”

“That doesn’t sound like a lot of fun,” I retorted.

She smiled at me, and then came and sat on my bed with me. My comforter had a flowery design with pink rose petals and peach geraniums on a white background. She traced one of the flowers with a manicured nail.

“So how long have you and Diego been together?” She asked me. Long enough to give you a good slap for kissing him. Diego had told me about the kiss in school on Monday. He said he had pushed her away, and I believed him.

“Like a year,” I told her. “We’re really close. Do you have a boyfriend?”

“No. John wants to be my boyfriend, but I don’t like him like that.”

I didn’t bother to say that it sure looked like she liked him like that at the party, but I didn’t want to bring that up right now. “Do you like anyone like that?”

For a moment our eyes locked and they spoke without us interfering. I heard the doorbell ring and got up to open it. Mom wasn’t home again because she was putting in some extra hours at the hospital, which meant the house was all mine for now. Diego stood at the door with Elvis, and I let them both in.

“My bus got here just as he did,” Diego explained as he gave me a quick peck on the lips. I liked that. “Oh, hey, Nelli,” he said. I liked that less.

“Hey, Nikki,” Elvis said, leaning in as if he wanted to give me a kiss, too. I patted him on the back and then pushed him in toward the living room.

“Hey, Elvis,” I said. “This is Nelli. Nelli, this is Elvis.”

“Nice to meet you,” Nelli said.

Elvis stood there with his mouth open. He didn’t end up saying anything.

“So what do you guys want to do?” Diego asked as he looked between me and Nelli.

“She likes to lay out by the pool and shop,” I pointed out. I reached over to tuck the tag of Diego’s red T-shirt back where it belonged.

“I’m up for anything,” Nelli compromised. “We could watch a movie or play Monopoly.”

Well played, Nelli. Well played.

“I want to do something different,” Diego said.

“You ever been on a yacht?” Nelli asked him.

No. None of us had.

Diego

Nelli’s father’s yacht was starch white and 52 feet long. He had named it *Encantada*, which was Spanish for “enchanted.” On the bright blue glistening water of Biscayne Bay, the four of us looked like a magazine ad for some trendy teenage clothing store. Nikki always looked ready for her close up, and Nelli seemed to perform perpetually. They lay side-by-side in almost matching striped bikinis working on their tans, and I sat and sketched them while Elvis set up the Monopoly board.

It was hard to not compare and contrast them: Nikki with her pale skin, Nelli with her tan skin. Nikki with her straight blond hair up in a ponytail, Nelli with her black curly hair up in a ponytail. Nikki’s green eyes that reflected some of the blue of the sky, Nelli’s brown eyes, which seemed to grow darker as the sun shined brighter. Nikki’s long and lean body that caused her bikini to fit her but not fill it out completely, Nelli’s petite and curvy body that completely filled out her bikini. The cherry on top was that they had on matching shades to protect their eyes. I wasn’t sure how Elvis could not be staring at them as much as I was.

“Okay, I think I found a way for the money to stay in place so the wind doesn’t make it fly away,” he said as he peeked at the girls.

“Good.” I continued to sketch.

“What do you want to be?”

“I’ll be the dog.”

“Appropriate,” he said as he put the dog on the game board. He picked the hat for himself and then asked the girls what they wanted to be. They both said the shoe, and then they laughed, ruining the perfect still life I had been observing. I put down my sketch pad and scooted over to the table to get ready to play.

“Do you guys want something to drink?” Nelli asked. She went into the stateroom, and Nikki came and sat beside me, re-doing her pony tail as she looked at the pieces on the board.

“Just Coke is good,” Elvis said.

“Yeah,” I agreed.

“Water,” Nikki requested.

Nelli returned with all the above and a water for herself, as well. The game turned out to be no different with four players instead of three. While we all tried certain strategies from time to time, we had all learned a long time ago that he or she who builds upon their property first usually wins.

“I haven’t played Monopoly in forever,” Nelli said with a smile on her face that I had only seen on young kids doing something they loved to do but hadn’t expected to do ever again.

“We tend to play at least once a week,” Nikki pointed out as she threw the dice and moved forward a few spaces. “You better get used to it.”

“I will,” Nelli said. “What else do I need to get used to?”

“Elvis,” I joked, and Elvis gave me a dirty look while the girls laughed.

“It’s too bad you can’t go to school with us,” Elvis said, deflecting the attention off him. Elvis knew how to get information from people, so I listened closely. “You go to one of those private schools around here don’t you?”

“Yeah,” Nelli said.

“It’s hard to get into those schools. You must be really smart.”

“Or loaded,” Nikki said, and then she covered her tracks. “Sorry, it’s just well-known that money can get you into anywhere. I didn’t mean to imply that’s how you got in.”

“Nikki’s really smart,” Elvis said. “She hates people who can go to those schools because they’re loaded and not because they like to be academically challenged.”

“That sounds like a disability,” I said.

Nelli laughed but Nikki didn’t.

“I’m pretty sure money is what got me into the school,” Nelli admitted. “But I do well. I like to be academically challenged.”

I threw the dice next and landed on the same square that Nelli occupied. She had bought the property so I forked over the rent.

“Diego doesn’t like to be academically challenged,” Nikki threw out there, and I glanced in her direction. “If he had it his way, he’d never go to school.”

“I just think that there’s more to be learned outside of school than there is inside of school,” I explained as Nikki bought a new property.

“I agree,” Nelli said, looking at me. I committed to memory this new look. Not one of understanding, but one of regret and knowledge.

Nelli

Diego and Nikki acted like friends. They definitely didn’t act like boyfriend and girlfriend. As we played the board game, they talked like two people who were very comfortable with each other, but who had no real attraction to each other. This didn’t make sense, and I couldn’t really put my finger on why. John had once told me that he had read in a magazine that boys were never friends with girls who they weren’t physically attracted to, so if John was right, then Diego had to be physically attracted to Nikki. How couldn’t he be? Nikki was pretty and blonde and smart and self-confident and very nice. In essence, perfect. Elvis saw this. Elvis was definitely attracted to her.

And Nikki was definitely attracted to Diego. She made efforts to carelessly touch him or stay close to him, but it wasn’t enough. She held back, and I think she held back because he held back. She didn’t want to give too much of something she wasn’t going to get in return.

I felt bad for Nikki, but a part of me wanted her to dump him so that I could get with him instead. I had no problems going after who I wanted. The problem was that I hadn’t found any guy that I really wanted like that. Not until now.

It was my turn to throw the dice, and I landed in jail with Diego’s piece. We both bypassed our next three turns to stay in there together. Nikki threw the dice a little harder than she needed to, and she looked between us a few times, but she never lost her focus on the game. I had lost my focus a long time ago.

“When’s your birthday?” I asked Diego.

“January,” he said, “I’ll be sixteen.”

“And yours?” I asked Nikki.

“April.”

“Are you planning anything big for your sweet sixteen?” I asked her.

“No,” she said.

VIZCAYA

“But it’s your sweet sixteen. It’s important.” I doubt she had a Quinceañera like I had had, so she obviously was going to have a big party for her sixteenth birthday. It only made sense.

“Important to whom?” Nikki asked me. “Not all of us care to be princesses.”

That was true, but I didn’t think it was true in Nikki’s case. I didn’t press the issue further and wondered what exactly her situation was. Her house had been a nice house in a very decent neighborhood. The furnishings and her room, along with her closet, had not shown any signs of lower-class status. There was nothing about Nikki that seemed like a sweet sixteen wasn’t in her future, but I guess I just didn’t know enough about her yet.

4: GUIDANCE

Nikki

I got an A-plus-super-plus on my Algebra 2 exam. I was on a high and walking around the school quad with an extra bounce in my strut. I waved at people with a smile as I passed by them. Today was going to be a great day. I sat beside Diego in the cafeteria and gave him a quick kiss on the cheek before opening my so-cute pink lunch tote with the big white daisy on the front. I took out my ham and cheese sandwich and started with that.

Diego sat distracted and drawing something in his sketchbook. I looked up, then around, then down at what he was drawing. It was the picture from the yacht, the one of me and Nelli lying in the sun, but he was adding detail to her and not to me.

So here it was. The proverbial crossroads. I could keep pretending that I was okay with this, I could tell him I was not okay with this, or I could just end this and let him get with Nelli while I tried to be okay with it and focused all my attention on school.

“Diego,” I said. I hadn’t made a decision, but I was hoping action would propel the decision forward without my intervention.

“Yeah?” he asked, still drawing the little nuances of Nelli’s hair.

“How do you think it makes me feel when I sit beside you and see you paying attention to Nelli?”

He stopped drawing and looked at me. “It’s just art.”

“Put yourself in my shoes. If you were sitting next to me, and I was drawing Elvis, how would you feel?”

“I think that would be funny.”

I paused then softly said, “This isn’t funny.”

“I’m sorry,” he said putting his sketch pad away.

I felt like an awful girlfriend for making him feel guilty about doing what he loved to do. He reached over to my chips bag and opened it, taking out a chip and eating it. “Do you want to watch a movie tonight?”

“I have to write my paper for English. Look at what I got on my Algebra 2 exam,” I said. I showed him my exam with the big, red A-plus on it.

“Wow, congrats.” He hand it back to me. It meant nothing to him. “I’ll probably go to Billy’s after school then.”

“Shouldn’t you work on your homework?”

“I don’t have any.”

This was probably true. While I was weighed down with more work than most people could handle, Diego’s classes seemed to think that homework was a product of the Dark Ages of education and that reinforcement of the lessons learned in the classrooms was not necessary. I sometimes got mad about this, not because I had to do more work, but because no one was forcing Diego or the other kids in the regular classes to really learn anything. It didn’t seem right. It seemed like no one wanted to bother to even try with the students that weren’t in the Honors classes or higher.

“Have fun with Billy.”

“Have fun with your English paper.”

I ate the rest of my sandwich.

Nelli

With the winter formal coming up, John had asked me to be his date. I had told him that I would think about it, which is why he was now standing at my locker waiting for me. “*Muevete*,” I said. John was pretty good at understanding my random Spanish instructions.

“Make me,” he taunted back, and I shoved him, which made him laugh. He stepped to the side and let me open my locker without further intrusion.

“So are you done thinking about it?”

“Shouldn’t you take a sophomore?”

“Have I ever cared about things like that?”

No he hadn’t. I pulled out my textbook for World History and closed my locker, “I was thinking of bringing someone else.”

“Bringing someone else?”

“A friend.”

“Who?”

I had talked myself into a corner. John knew everyone that I knew. Sometimes Miami could seem like a very small place. “Just someone else.”

John wasn’t content with this, but he seemed to accept it. He took my history book from my hands and walked me to my class. When I got there, he handed the book back to me but didn’t let go as I grabbed it. “Nel, you know I care about you, right?”

“Yeah, I do.”

“I don’t plan on giving up.”

“I know that, too,” I told him. He let go of the book, and I told him that I would see him later.

I loved history and this was definitely my favorite class of the day. I once told Mami this, and she told me that it was cute, but I needed to focus more on my acting classes. I once told Papi how much I loved history, and he told me that it would come in handy if I ever wanted to be a lawyer. Part of me wanted to be a lawyer, the other part of me just wanted to make Mami happy.

I was paying attention to my history teacher begin his lesson on Catherine the Great when I felt my cell phone vibrate. I reached down into my backpack and pulled it out to see a text message from Diego. He wanted to know how I was. I looked up at the teacher and waited for him to turn around to write something on the board before texting Diego back that I was fine.

I’m not sure why I felt my stomach flip, or why I could see him even if he was in a different part of town at a different school, or why I could imagine him speaking the very words I was texting. It wasn’t normal to feel this way, and if it was, I wished that I could be normal every day.

Diego

Mrs. McCloud wanted to know what I wanted to do with the rest of my life. “You obviously show no interest in attending school, your grades are abysmal, you never pay attention. How much longer do you think you’re going to get by doing this?”

Mrs. McCloud was my guidance counselor and my sufficient tardies had earned me a trip to her office. “Until I’m sixteen and don’t have to show up

anymore,” was my reply. This wasn’t really true, but it was this type of answer that always made Mrs. McCloud react. Her pale skin began to blotch and her thinning hair seemed to stand even more on end. She wasn’t that old, but she had definitely passed her prime, if she had ever had one to begin with.

“Your mother,” she began flipping through my file with agitation, “Works so hard, Diego. She’s an office manager isn’t she? At a law firm? Do you think she got a job like that with your attitude? She’s a very hard worker. You have to be a hard worker, as well if you want to get that far in life.”

I’m not like my mother. We have very little in common. I once thought about doing one of those DNA tests to see just how much of her I do have in me. I bet the results wouldn’t even break one percent.

“Why do I have to get far in life?” I asked Mrs. McCloud. “Why does everyone always tell you about what you should do but never about what really happens? Do you think my mom wanted to be an office manager? Do you think I want to be one?”

Mrs. McCloud sighed and looked through my file. She hated dealing with students like me. There was nothing fundamentally wrong with me, nothing that could make her call my mom and recommend I get a tutor or be tested for a learning disability, nothing to let her call child services to investigate if I was being abused or anything.

“Diego, would it hurt you to just try?” she finally decided to ask. It was the best she could do for someone like me.

“I do try,” I told her looking her right in the eyes, “I’m here more often than I’m not.”

I left Mrs. McCloud’s office and went back to the art class I had been pulled out of. I sat next to Nikki, who waited for me to tell her what had happened, but she guessed anyway.

“They don’t like you when you’re late,” she said as she worked on adding some abstract shapes to the drawing she had done at Vizcaya.

I took out my own sketchbook. “Do you think it’s funny that if you’re not here, you can be excused, but if you’re late, you get into more trouble? It seems counterproductive. They penalize you for showing up at all.”

“That’s because in the real world you can’t be late to your job.” Nikki always had a rational explanation for everything.

“Same situation. You can call out sick and lose a whole day of work without consequence, but if you show up late it counts against you, even though you’re there to do the work.”

Nikki put her pencil down with a slight hint of frustration. She smoothed back her hair and picked up a piece of charcoal. “I get it, Diego. You don’t want to be part of the assembly line. Go ahead and be late all you want, go ahead and get expelled, go ahead and do what you want. It’s what you do. It’s who you are right? Then do it.” She put the charcoal down with force, closed up her sketchbook, and got up from the table.

“What are you doing?”

“Asking for a library pass. I want to finish my project alone.”

I watched Nikki get her library pass and leave the classroom. Elvis sat in her now vacated seat and shook his head at me.

“What?” I asked him.

“She always worries about you,” he said as he laid out the photos he had taken at Vizcaya. He lined them up on the table in five columns and six rows. “You shouldn’t make her worry so much. She doesn’t deserve that. She’s got a lot to worry about on her own without worrying about whether or not you’ll survive sophomore year.”

I looked at the photos and realized that the majority of them were of Nikki. “She’d worry anyway,” I said as I picked one up of her looking down at her sketch pad as she worked on her drawing. She was sitting on the floor and leaning against one of the gates with her knees drawn up to serve as an easel for her sketchpad. The green gardens were her backdrop and the bright sun made her blond hair golden. “It’s what she does. It’s who she is.”

Elvis said nothing and focused his attention on the photos before him.

5: THE ROSE

Nikki

I wasn't sure why Nelli invited us over to her house. She could've just invited Diego, and I never would've known about it. I wasn't the kind of girlfriend to consistently check up on him. Maybe Nelli was, and maybe she just assumed I was. Maybe that's why she invited the both of us. To be nice, she invited Elvis, too, but Elvis had to work late on some yearbook project.

Nelli's house seemed to be trapped in a maze of palm tree vegetation. I had a feeling that the sun never hit the grass in her front yard. She had a two-story home that looked like the kind of house people find in an architectural magazine, the ones where people are showing off their dream home. Her house felt old, like it had stories and history trapped in its walls.

Diego and I stepped into the foyer and were met with European furniture and a really big sliding glass wall of windows that gave us a pretty oh-my-God-is-that-for-real view of the tropical pool behind it. There were a lot more palm trees out there.

"My room's over this way," Nelli said. She was in really tiny blue shorts and a polo shirt that had her school's name on it, so my guess was that she hadn't changed out of her school uniform for whatever sport or activity she was taking part in. "I just got home," she confirmed. "I have athletics for last period."

"That sucks," I said. I took phys ed over the summer so that I could get it over and done with and never have to deal with it again so long as I lived.

“I like it,” Nelli said. Of course she did. “I like ending with the easiest class.”

“Maybe I should take physics next semester,” Diego said.

I ignored him and focused instead on the princess-pink, pink-everywhere-pink room that I had just walked into. She had a princess canopy bed, with pink lace curtains that were open. She had a pink and white dresser and desk set, and really big white mirror, and a bay window with a really nice white bench with lots of pink and white pillows that said things like “Princess” and “Diva” and “Goddess” and “Spoiled.” The drapes of her bay window were also pink with white and silver hearts lightly splattered all over them.

“So let me guess,” Diego said looking around, “Your favorite color is brown.”

“I love brown,” Nelli said. She opened the bay window a bit to allow some of the November breeze in. “Nikki, come here,” she directed me as she opened the door to a walk-in closet that could have been its own boutique on Collins Avenue.

I looked through her closet, just as she had looked through mine. She had a lot of designer labels, a lot of little black dresses, a lot of trendy pants, a lot of classy pants, a lot of trendy tops, a lot of classy tops, a whole section that was just jeans, a whole column of shorts of various colors and styles, and it all lead to the furthest wall, which was just a wall of shoes. She had flip flops to stilettos to everything in between. I felt overwhelmed.

“Feel free to borrow whatever you like,” she said. I felt like it was bribery.

Diego

I sat on the bay window bench with my sketchbook and watched as Nikki and Nelli put on a fashion show. I wasn’t drawing either of them. Instead I was drawing Nelli’s bed, the soft folds of her comforter, the pillow perfectly indented in the middle surrounded by pillows that were not indented at all, the skirt of the bed and all of its ruffles. I could have spent hours drawing it.

“You look really great in white,” Nelli said to Nikki as she walked to the full-length mirror in a small, white, summer dress.

“I always thought it would make me look more pale,” Nikki admitted as she turned to see how the dress looked from the back.

“No, it just makes you glow,” Nelli said. “Try these heels.”

Nikki slid on a pair of white heels with a single thin strap over the toes. I had to admire how sexy they made her feet look. Then I went back to drawing the bed.

“Wow,” Nelli said. “This outfit looks way better on you than it’s ever looked on me.”

“I doubt that,” Nikki said, but she couldn’t stop looking at herself in the mirror. Almost as if she didn’t recognize the girl she was looking at.

There was a polite knock on the door and after Nelli yelled that they could come in, an older woman walked in with a silver tray that had champagne flutes on them.

“*Gracias*, Felipa,” Nelli said as she motioned for her to put the tray on the desk. “Felipa made us some champagne spritzers.”

Nikki and I exchanged glances. Then she asked for both of us, “What’s a spritzer?”

“You’ve never had a spritzer?” Nelli asked, walking over and taking a glass. “It’s just juice with a little bit of champagne. Try it.” She took a sip of her own.

I reached over and grabbed one of the champagne glasses and gave it a taste. It was bubbly and a little funny and it tasted a little dry. Was it possible for a liquid to taste dry?

“It’s kind of good,” Nikki admitted.

I nodded in agreement and watched as Nelli observed me before lifting her glass.

“To new friends,” she said.

I clinked my glass against hers and Nikki’s and said, “To new friends,” as well.

Suddenly, Nelli dragged Nikki back into the abyss of clothes. “I have the perfect thing that you can borrow to wear to school tomorrow.”

I began to draw the rose carved into the white post of the bed. I wondered if Nelli appreciated the attention to detail that had been used to build her the bed of her dreams. In case she hadn’t, I made sure to spend a little more time drawing that rose as exact as I could.

“What do you think, Diego?” Nelli asked.

Nikki emerged from the closet with skin-tight black pants and a dark purple shirt that had a black band around the bottom. It hugged her hips, giving curve to her body. As the finishing touch, she had on tall black heels.

“I think you look amazing,” I said to Nikki.

“You should wear it to school tomorrow,” Nelli told her.

Nikki looked between us and went back to the closet to change.

Nelli

After Diego and Nikki had left, I had gone into Papi's office to see if he was home yet. He sat in his leather chair, writing something into his large black planner. The stereo with surround sound was on the local Latin station, which was playing a melodic salsa beat.

"*Hola*, Papi," I said as I closed the door behind me.

"Hey, baby, how was school?" He looked up with a smile and put his pen down. He stretched his arms over his head, letting out a big yawn. Then he placed his hands behind his head as he leaned back in his chair.

"It was school," I said. I sat in the chair across from him and leaned forward on his desk, "The winter formal is coming up."

"Is it? Did Mami take you shopping for your dress yet?"

"No, not yet. I haven't reminded her."

"I'm sure she has it in her planner," he said, dropping his hands and leaning forward on his desk as well. He gave me a goofy look, and I laughed and leaned in even more, letting the chair balance on its front two legs.

"Papi, can I ask you something weird?"

"The weirder the better. What is it?"

I looked at my father's warm, brown eyes, the very ones I was pretty sure I had inherited even though everyone liked to say that I looked exactly like my mother in every way, including the eyes. "Have you ever liked someone that belonged to someone else?"

"That is a weird question," he said as his eyes widened a little. This wasn't the conversation he wanted to have with me. "First of all, no one really belongs to anyone, Nelli."

"But if they have a girlfriend, you know?"

"John has a girlfriend?"

I looked at my dad like he had just made a bad joke. "Papi, I don't like John."

"I like that answer a lot," he acknowledged and then sat back against his chair again and crossed his arms. "*Tu abuelo* once told me that a man is only ever allowed to truly love one woman in his lifetime. He will think he's fallen in love many times, he will have had many loves in his lifetime, but when he lies on his death bed and thinks back to all the women that he has known,

there will be one that will stand out and one whose memory he will take with him to the next life. That's the memory of the one woman he truly loved."

My grandfather was always telling stories like that, as if they were supposed to be meaningful, as if he was wise and had to pass on his wisdom to anyone who would listen. My grandfather had been a restaurateur his whole life, and on his deathbed he confided in me that the memory he was taking with him was the memory of the most perfect *platanos* he had ever tasted in his whole entire life.

"He wouldn't have happened to have mentioned how that works for girls would he?"

"Your grandfather was a male chauvinist. I don't think the thought ever occurred to him." We both laughed and I got up and gave Papi a kiss on the cheek and a tight hug before leaving him to his work. I went back to my room and found that Diego had left his drawing on my bed for me. I picked it up and looked at it. My bed looked beautiful from his eyes. The soft November breeze rustled the edges of the paper and seemed to glide over them as if directing my eyes. I followed the breeze to the rose on one of my bed posts and then looked at my bed to see if it was really there. Funny how I had never noticed that detail before.

6: CHRISTMAS

Diego

I stared at the book in front of me. It was a glossy, hard back, coffee table book with drawings from violent and dark graphic novels. I opened it to see what looked like a half man and half lizard clawing his way through the body of an overweight, sleazy-looking politician.

“It’s from Chris,” my mom said unsure of how I felt about it. “He wasn’t sure what to get you, but he knew you liked art. Do you like it?”

By asking me this, what my mom really wanted to know was did I approve of Chris, but it was hard to approve of a guy she wouldn’t let me meet. “It’s fine,” I said putting the book to the side and grabbing the next box under the tree.

“This one’s from your grandmother,” she said.

I opened it to find a bottle of cologne.

“Isn’t that nice?” Mom grabbed the bottle and sniffed it. “Hmm, it smells great.”

I smelled it and thought it was alright. I’d wear it anyway and see what Nikki thought about it. If she liked it, it would stay. If she didn’t, I’d give it to Elvis.

“Open this one,” mom said. She handed me a box that was wrapped in green paper that had reindeers all over it. There was a big red bow on top, and I knew this was the present she had probably spent the most energy in picking out for me. I opened it and found two things: one was a new laptop,

the second was a new art design computer program. It must've cost her a fortune.

"Do you like it?" She was bursting out of her red turtleneck with excitement.

"I like it a lot," I said moving my fingertips over the new white machine. "I can't believe you got me this."

"Well, Chris was telling me that if art was going to be your future career that you needed the latest technology. He said there's a big demand for graphic designers."

It's really weird how I never thought of art as a future career. "It's really nice. Thank you, Mom."

I gave her a strong hug. This satisfied her, and I opened the rest of my presents. They were mostly new clothes she had bought me. Then, I watched her open the gifts I had bought her with my allowance. I had given her a simple thin gold bracelet and some comfortable slippers for when she had a long day at work. I wanted her to be able to come home and relax. Maybe I had bought it for her to guilt her into coming home more.

I had also drawn a still-life of some of her favorite flowers in the backyard, which may have also been a big hint, as well. She thanked me for all of it and then kissed my cheek, hugged me again, and got up to get started on our Christmas dinner.

As I unpacked my laptop and the software and started everything up, I wondered why she hadn't invited Chris, or why she hadn't decided to spend it with him.

Nikki

I got everything that I wanted. The Prada bag that I had coveted, the too-cute-for-words skirt that I had seen in one of the boutiques in South Beach, and the make-up kit that I had been drooling over after Nelli and I had hung out at the Aventura Mall one Saturday afternoon.

Mom had gotten me a few other things that I had wanted, as well, but the point was that I had gotten it all. Everything. The whole shebang. Mom brought out a plate of pizza rolls and sat back on the couch with me as she started the movie. This Christmas Day's selection included the classics *Heathers* and *Clueless*.

I reached over and grabbed one of the pizza rolls. As I took a bite out of it, I wondered which bank my mom had robbed to get the funds for my out-of-control wish list.

“Mom,” I said as I admired Winona Ryder’s clothing. But I couldn’t ask the question I wanted to ask her because I knew it would ruin the moment, and I didn’t want to be responsible for ruining our Christmas.

“What?” she asked as she ate another pizza roll.

Then a very strange thing happened. A tear rolled out of my eye. I tried to wipe it away quickly, but she caught the action. The plate of pizza rolls was discarded as she hugged me.

“What’s wrong? Did you not like your presents?”

“I loved them,” I said, trying to remain stoic, but it’s hard to not fall on cry once your mom has hugged you tight. “I loved them a lot. But, I don’t know how you bought it all because I know we don’t have that much money and now I feel guilty.” So much for not confessing.

My mom stayed quiet for a few moments, and then I could feel her chest rising and falling in little spurts. I pulled away and looked at her as she tried so hard to keep her laughter in check, but it didn’t work. She laughed really hard, and I ended up laughing, too.

“Okay, I have a confession,” Mom said, and I braced myself for the bank robbery story. “I used your dad’s child support money to buy all your presents. Does that make you feel better?”

“Lots,” I said. “Mom, I didn’t expect everything on my list. It was more options that you could pick and choose from.”

“I know, baby,” she said taking my hand, “But you deserve it. You’re a straight A student, you never get in trouble, you even keep your room and the house clean when I’m not around. You’re practically raising yourself at this point. You need to stop worrying about these things and just enjoy being fifteen. I want you to have the best. Always. No matter what it is or what it costs.”

I hugged her again, and then reached across her to grab the pizza roll plate again. Just as I was picking out the pizza roll of my choice, the doorbell rang. We definitely were not expecting guests, so we both got up and ran over to the door to see who it could possibly be.

“Elvis?” I asked opening the door. He had on an elf hat, which he took off and held over his heart. Then he started singing “Silent Night.” It was crystal clear and perfect, because that’s how Elvis’s singing voice naturally was. For a minute, I felt like I had won a contest and some pop singer singing

“Silent Night” was the prize. Except it was Elvis. When he was done, he handed me a small photo album and took off running.

“Oh,” Mom said, “I was going to offer him some pizza rolls. That was so romantic.”

I opened the photo album and saw pictures that Elvis had taken of me, Diego, and Nelli on the yacht. And then there were the pictures of me at Vizcaya, but as it turned out, I hadn’t been the only person Elvis had photographed there. He’d captured Diego drawing on the steps, And, standing there with her gorgeous orange gown next to one of the fountains, was Nelli. Not so romantic after all.

Nelli

The music was loud and the voices louder as family members from all over town packed our home in celebration of Christmas. My short red dress had thin straps and a ruffle on the bottom. A cute red bow held my hair back, and my shoes were silver with two little straps that had glittery faux gems on them.

Tio took my hand as I walked by and spun me around to the merengue beat. I finished the song with him, giving him a run for his money with my natural moves. He gave me a hug afterward and told me that I was always his favorite niece. Abuela found me and told me to find one of my little cousins who had asked for soda but who had disappeared before she could give it to him.

I stepped over another cousin’s legs as I walked past the white Christmas tree that Mami had insisted on this year. She had white lights on it and strictly silver ornaments. She had hired an interior decorator to transform our front room, living room, and dining room into a winter wonderland, and the lady had done a really amazing job. There were even fake blocks of ice around the room that people could sit on, and Mami had almost married the lady for being brilliant and practical all at once.

“Nelli,” said the deep voice that I knew so well. It was a voice that always put a smile on my face whenever I heard it. I turned to see Papi’s best friend, Trace, and his current wife. I gave the man a huge hug and then got even more excited when he handed me several big boxes wrapped in gold wrapping paper with big gold bows and ribbons on top.

“What’d you get me?” I asked him taking the boxes.

“That would defeat the point of me having wrapped them in the first place,” he said with a laugh.

“You so did not wrap these,” I said.

“Trace, you’re finally here,” Papi said coming over. They exchanged hand slaps and a guy hug. “Hey, good to see you,” Papi said to the wife. She gave him a big smile and said it was good to see him, too.

Since his first wife had died in a car accident, Trace had lost his ability to find any good women. This new one was no exception. She had gold digger written all over her, and she was probably cheating on him with any new act that he was producing in his condo.

Putting those thoughts aside, I sat on the chair in the foyer and quickly opened the presents while Papi made sure Trace and the wife got glasses of wine. The wrapping paper came off like satin, and I opened the boxes to find new purses, new shoes, and a sparkling pair of diamond stud earrings. I sprang up and gave Trace a bigger hug than I had before and showed Papi my gifts.

“She sabotaged us this year,” Papi said to Trace as he laughed at how excited I appeared. “She told us all she wanted was a Monopoly board game. I should’ve known it was a set up.”

“No, I loved my game, too,” I said. I gave Papi a kiss on the cheek before running off to find Mami so I could show her my new gifts from Trace. She was in the kitchen directing the staff around as they began setting food upon the tables for the big family dinner.

“Those are beautiful,” she said, but she wasn’t really paying attention. This dinner had to be perfect because everything had to be perfect. Since she had already assured that I looked perfect before the guests had arrived, her attention was only on what needed to be perfected next.

I went back to Trace and sat beside him, letting him pull me into him, “So you liked it all?”

“Yes, yes, and yes,” I assured him.

“What’s with the Monopoly?” he asked and laughed before I could even answer.

Trace and Papi went way back. They were friends in college with dreams of taking over the music industry. Papi wanted to run record labels and Trace wanted to create the sounds that were going to make them rich. Their plan had worked, but it hadn’t been a fairy tale ending for Trace. His wife and five-year-old daughter had died in a car accident a long time ago, and the only thing that kept Trace from joining them was Papi telling him that he still had

family because we were his family. Papi insisted that Trace had to keep living for the family that he had lost.

Trace had always been like an uncle to me, but after he lost his own daughter, he became like a second father to me. He swore that he would never let that happen to me or Mami because he didn't want Papi to go through what he had gone through.

"I just like playing it, and I realized I didn't have my own," I explained to him.

"Uh uh," he said. He always knew when I was lying. I didn't know how he did it. "It's gotta be a boy."

"Why?" I almost screamed in defense. "I like it," but I was laughing because of the look on his face that told me he knew better.

"Who's this boy?" he asked, "Because I know John wouldn't inspire you to want a board game."

"It's nothing. Trust me. Way nothing."

"Way nothing, huh? Alright. Well when you're ready to tell me about this way nothing, I'll be right here." He squeezed me against him tighter, and I loved the way his arm could just envelop me and make me feel so safe. "And speaking of way nothings, why did I find underwear that probably fit a teenage boy's skinny ass in my condo?"

I laughed really hard and pulled away from him shaking my head. "I don't know. I didn't see any nudity at the party."

"You better not have. Just because you connived me into giving you reign of the condo as my Quince present to you does not mean I won't go ballistic on you if I find out anything crazy happened there."

"Nothing crazy happened. Promise."

Trace looked into my eyes with his own dark brown ones, and I knew that he could see right through me. But, he just patted my knee and suggested we go see if Mami had everything ready.

Nikki

I hadn't opened the present that Diego had given me. I was scared that I would open it and find a drawing of Nelli. I know this was way irrational of me, but Elvis's present had turned me into an irrational wreck. I got into bed and stared at the flimsy present in my hands. As I turned it over and over, I wondered if he had gotten Nelli anything. At the very least, I could only

imagine that he had drawn her something, probably a picture of herself. Maybe he'd even put a note on it like...okay I didn't want to think about that.

I finally ripped off the paper and turned the sketch over so that I could see what he had drawn me. A small smile came over my face as I saw myself, staring back at myself, with a book in my hand and a necklace that had a charm that said D & N.

The charm wasn't a drawing. It was real, and I took it off the drawing and put it around my neck. He had finally drawn me, all of me: the strands of my hair, the same shading of the highlights and lowlights, the linear angle of my nose, and the small freckles that appeared when the sun was very bright. I never wanted to forget this Christmas.

7: THE STUDIO

Nikki

Diego turned sixteen on a Tuesday. I had a card, a balloon, and a small present for him. I had found this paint by numbers set that was so cute, and I thought he'd think it was fun. Diego took his art seriously, which meant that he also liked things that were considered novice at best. I had once watched him get completely lost in a coloring book that one of the little kids at art camp had left behind. He had taken crayons and colored a teddy bear with an ice cream cone in the most artistic way I had ever seen, and he had done it just because it was there and it was habit for him to create art.

Elvis thought I was a fool. On the bus he had pointed out several times that Diego wouldn't show up. He was sixteen. He was done with school. He was probably at Billy's being a bum and not looking back at his decision. I had a little more faith in Diego.

In third period, I sent him my usual text message. The card, balloon, and present were in my locker, and a small wave of panic slowly began to creep into my arms. I didn't want to let Elvis's words get to me because I knew better. I knew Diego. I knew him. The text came back and I did something that I had never done before. I ran. I'm sure my teacher thought I must have badly had to use the restroom, or it was a serious case of one of those "girl-type" problems. But it was just pure relief.

I ran to my locker and got the card and the balloon and the present and practically skipped to the front office. When I saw Diego, I wrapped my arms

around his neck and went in for an over the top kiss that got a very loud clearing of the throat from the school secretary. “Happy Birthday,” I told him.

He just laughed at me, and we walked together out of the front office and to one of the benches right outside. He opened his present, and the hug he gave me felt like a million thank yous rolled into one.

For the rest of the day, my heart leapt over and over again anytime I saw him walking around with his balloon. Elvis tried to kill the mood by saying Diego would just drop out tomorrow, but I shoved him and went on my merry little existence. When the final bell rang, Diego stood waiting for me outside of my class, and he took my hand and we walked together to the bus stop.

“So what do you want to do for your birthday?” I asked him.

“Buy stuff for my studio,” he said.

His studio? What studio?

Diego

For my sixteenth birthday, my mom had left me a note on the kitchen counter with a key and an address. The note read that Chris had gotten a good deal on a studio that I could use. The underlying message was that there was no point in pretending that this thing between my mom and Chris had not been taken to the next level. I was pretty sure that it was only a matter of time before the house was put on the market.

The studio was in the artsy area near downtown, the place where college kids worked while trying to break into the fashion industry or the art scene. My spot was on the third floor of a five-story art-deco building that should have been retouched years ago. At the very least, the green and white paint needed a new coat. When I walked inside, the windows were all open and the hardwood floor creaked under the weight of my steps. It wasn’t as large as the kind of art loft I had always dreamed of, but considering that I never thought I’d have one to begin with, it was suddenly the coolest place I had ever stepped foot in.

“How long do you get to keep it?” Nikki asked as she inspected the white walls that had splotches of primer that probably covered up holes or dirt or maybe even evidence.

“I guess until Chris convinces my mom to get rid of me altogether.”

"I'm sure it's not like that," she said to make me feel better. She walked across to the other side to look out the window, "If it had been, then he would've gotten you furniture." I wondered if Nikki ever got tired of making sense of the world.

"See anything interesting?" I asked her as I put my balloon by the sink that jutted out from the corner. I opened the card and placed it on the small white-washed shelf above the sink. It was probably supposed to serve as my medicine cabinet. I left the present on the edge, since there was no place else to put it.

"An alleyway with trash that needs to be picked up," she said, and then she walked to the front windows, "This is the better view. You could stare right into the apartments of the people across the street."

"It's good inspiration," I said as I watched the way the breeze came in from the window and played with her hair. I walked up to her and enjoyed how fruity her hair smelled. My arms wrapped around her, and I pressed my cheek against hers as we both looked at the apartment building across the way. "I guess I should get a telescope."

"You won't need it. Maybe binoculars if you want up-close details of their reading material on their night stands."

I placed a kiss on her cheek then looked across the way again, "So what do you think I should get? A couch? Should I just go ahead and get a bed?"

"You definitely don't have room for both," she said. I observed the small smile that played at her lips as she thought about what I could do with this space. "Maybe a futon. Then you'd have a couch and a bed."

"Makes sense," I moved my face so that my nose got lost in her hair, and I dropped little kisses behind her ear and on the back of her head. Reluctantly, I let go of her and took her hand, tugging her along. "Come on, I can't buy anything standing here, and you know I can't buy anything without you there to tell me what to buy."

She knew I was right, and she playfully pulled me close to her to give me another kiss before running toward the door in anticipation of a new shopping adventure.

Nelli

I bought Diego a wallet for his birthday. I didn't know if he needed one, but it seemed like the proper gift to give him. I had had his initials monogrammed

on the softest leather he had probably ever touched, and the pure black color would never clash with anything that he wore. I had wanted to give it to him in person, so when he told me to meet him at this new address, I wasn't sure what he had planned.

The studio was very tiny, at least compared to the studios I was used to seeing. One of my uncles owned a gallery, and his studio was about five times the size of what Diego had. But this studio suited Diego somehow, maybe because Diego's art was bigger than any studio he could ever have.

In the back of my mind, I felt that Diego's studio should be Vizcaya, where I had first met him. The large Roman inspired villa with the courtyard would have been perfect for him, with each room being a shrine to each piece, and the courtyard being where he spent his time perfecting his current painting. He could sit in the gardens to find his newest inspiration. If it had been humanly possible, I would've gotten him Vizcaya for his sixteenth birthday.

"So what do you think?" he asked me. "The futon's new. Nikki helped me buy it today."

"It's perfect," I said to him. The futon was dark blue like Biscayne Bay holding onto its last drop of sun before a big storm passed through. "How much time do you think you'll spend here?" I looked out the windows as the sounds of night breathed life into the small space.

"I don't know yet. I guess I have to talk to my mom about what this all really means."

I turned and looked at him, and there we stood across from each other with only the hardwood floor and the sounds of the night between us. A single light from across the street illuminated him, and I realized for the first time that the only light he had in the studio was a floor lamp that he had set up near the sink in the far corner.

I took the few steps that were between us and reached up to move the strands of his dark brown hair away from his blue eyes. He didn't move, didn't hesitate, didn't even flinch. He just looked directly at me, and I acted, letting my lips touch his. My hand grabbed the back of his neck as I tasted the slight saltiness of his lips.

I stopped kissing him and looked at him, waiting and expecting a proper response in return, a kiss or a word like "yes" or an invitation to stay the night. However, he kept looking at me and instead of kissing him, I asked him, "What do you see when you look at me?"

VIZCAYA

He answered as if he had known the answer long before I had thought of asking the question, “Every mistake I have yet to make.”

I wanted to tell him that it wouldn't be a mistake, but Diego had his own way of looking at things and nothing I could say would change how he viewed whatever it was that was happening right now. The only thing I had working in my favor seemed to be that Diego didn't seem to have a problem blurring the line between good and bad, and when he finally kissed me back, we both knew that he had just made his first mistake.

8: VIP

Nikki

Mom couldn't understand how Diego's mom could support him having his own studio. Even less, she couldn't understand how Diego's mom was allowing herself to get so caught up in the affections of her boyfriend to the point where she suddenly forgot the fundamental principles of parenting.

"He's not taking it well is he?" Mom asked as she rinsed the popcorn bowl.

"He's taking it like he takes everything."

"You should invite him over for dinner. I bet he hasn't had a good home-cooked meal in a while."

"Mom, we haven't had a good home-cooked meal in a while." I tried so hard not to laugh, but it came out anyway. Mom laughed, too, and the microwave beeped as if it was laughing with us. "You know, I could make something though. Have it all ready by the time you get home, and he could come over and we could have a nice dinner."

"I think that would be really nice." Mom wiped the bowl dry with a paper towel and set it on the counter so that I could pour the popcorn into it. She fell silent as I did this, and I knew that a lot was on her mind. I didn't bother to interrupt her thoughts. I threw the empty bag away and reached into the fridge for two sodas. I turned and saw mom looking at me in a way that I quickly interpreted as having to do with memories long forgotten.

"Is everything okay?" I put the sodas on the counter.

“I was just remembering how you used to get so excited by popcorn when you were little. The idea of the kernels popping. I remember you asking me how it all worked, and you were convinced that each popcorn bag had a magic spell inside of it, which is why some popped better than others.”

“I was a really weird kid,” I said. I had a feeling where this conversation was going, and I really wanted to deflect it.

“You were always a good kid.”

“I’m still a good kid.” Deflect, deflect, deflect.

“You’ll be sixteen in a few months.”

“Which is still considered a kid, underage, illegal for anything that could really get me into trouble.” I was bad at deflecting.

“I know,” mom said carefully, “But your boyfriend just essentially got his own place.”

“Mom,” I said in that horrified tone of I-can’t-believe-you’re-going-to-have-this-conversation-with-me-after-I-popped-a-magic-bag-of-popcorn.

“Nikki, I’m just a little concerned. I’m your mother. I’m allowed to be concerned.”

“You’re wasting your time. Have I ever given you a reason to be concerned?”

“It’s different when there’s a boy involved.” My mom would be the one to point this out. She could tell you all about how she let her life spiral out of control when she met and fell in love with my dad.

“Okay, but keep this in mind,” I told her, “Diego has been practically living alone for about a year now. His mom is never around. This isn’t any different, and it doesn’t change anything about how we are as a couple.”

Her eyes twitched at this, as if she had never really thought about what it meant that I went around calling Diego my boyfriend. I could suddenly see in her face that she had always thought of it in that innocent kindergarten way of a boy giving you a kiss on the playground just to make you giggle and then running away so he could laugh with his friends.

“I guess.” She paused to get her thoughts in order. “I mean, you can talk to me, honey. About anything.”

I almost laughed at my mom because at that moment she was so adorable. She tried so hard to say the right thing and be the perfect cross between mom and best friend. “I know, Mom.”

“I guess...do I need to...I mean, of course, I should make a doctor’s appointment...”

“Oh my God,” I said again in that tone I had used earlier.

“Well, Nikki, if you’re going to be doing those things—”

“I’m not doing anything. Mom, trust me, Diego and I, the only thing we’ve ever done like that is kiss. I promise.”

She looked relieved, but she stood her ground, as well, “It’s probably best if we just get it over with don’t you think? I know how young love can be. One minute you’re kissing and the next...I just think that even if it doesn’t happen until you’re 30 with a stable income and set in your career of choice that you should be protected. Just in case.”

“Okay, Mom, fine. Can we just not talk about this anymore?”

“Definitely,” she said, stealing the bowl of popcorn and leaving the kitchen.

Diego

I was sitting alone in the middle of the empty living room of our empty house dialing the number to my mother’s cell phone. She never had the chance to talk, and now would be no different, but this time I was going to say something that would hopefully not have her say she’ll call me later and hang up.

“Diego, I’m in the middle of something. Let me call you...”

“I’m not accepting the studio until I meet him.”

She exhaled a loud sigh, a purposeful sigh. “Right now isn’t the best time for us to have this conversation.”

“I’m sorry, am I interrupting sex or something?”

“Diego!”

I could hear voices behind her fall silent. I wondered where she was, where she ever was. Was he hosting people at his place? What kind of place did he have in the first place?

“I want to meet him.”

“We will talk about this when I get home.” The line went dead.

Nelli

I had a giddy expression at the club. John thought I was happy to see him, and he picked me up and twirled me around in greeting. I hit his shoulder with my tiny silver clutch purse but laughed anyway. He smelled like alcohol and expensive cologne.

“They’re not letting us near VIP tonight,” John said, putting his hand around my waist and pulling me close again. “Some big shot rapper is here.”

We were way too young to be in the clubs, but because of who my dad was, we could sneak in to certain ones at times. The fact that I was let in on a night that VIP was roped off for a big shot rapper meant that he was probably affiliated with my dad in some way. I looked up at the VIP area and spotted Trace. I quickly ducked behind John and said, “We have to go.”

“Nel, this is the place to be tonight.”

“We’ll find a new place. Trace is here. I can’t be here. He’ll give me that look that I hate.”

John looked amused at me. He had been around long enough to know that Trace wouldn’t stay mad at me, but he also knew that I would never want to look bad in front of Trace to begin with. “Fine. We can go back to my house. My parents are out of town for the week.”

My friends that I had originally arrived with returned to my side with drinks in their hands, but when John told them the new plan they were less than enthusiastic.

“Come on, Nelli, get us into VIP,” Lindsey said.

Danielle took a hold of my arm and looked at me with pleading eyes. They were always doing this. Danielle’s boyfriend, Ezra, got in on the act, and they all started laughing before Lindsey began to beg again.

The truth was that I had no more of a chance of getting them up there than anyone else. The concept was one that I had explained to them many times, and they had known me long enough to know that this was just how it was. Unfortunately, whenever we were in a situation like this, they still tried. Like if it was divine intervention that they happened to be at the club with me the same night that this big rapper was there.

“You guys can try,” I told them, “I’m going to John’s.”

Again the protests came, and I wondered if I was going to have to really stand there and endure this. We were under age; the last place the club was going to let us be was in the very area that would get the most attention. It’s not to say that I had never gone into VIP when a big name was there. But it was one thing when it was just me and one friend. A group of friends was just asking for trouble.

“Come on,” John tried to tell our friends as he put his arm around me, “We’ll have more fun at my place than we’ll have up there.”

“But look at us.” Danielle gestured at us. “We are looking so hot right now. We need to be showing off, not hanging out at your place playing drinking games.”

“She’s got a point,” Ezra said.

I looked at John for help, but John high-fived Ezra, and I knew all was lost.

“Fine,” I said, extracting myself from both John and Danielle, “I’ll go home and you guys can do whatever you want.”

I turned to leave, but John caught my hand and pulled me close to him, “We’re just playing, Nel. Let’s just go and leave them here.”

“Why are you being like this, Nelli?” Danielle said suddenly catching an attitude. “Ever since your birthday, you’ve been acting like you don’t want to be with us anymore. First you stop hanging out with us as much, then you show up to the formal stag when John was available, and now you don’t want to party in public with us?”

Danielle was doing this on purpose. She liked to cause scenes. “I’m not going to argue with you right now,” I told her calmly, but I felt a pair of eyes staring down at me so hard that I knew I was in trouble before I looked up. Trace motioned for me to come up in a way that didn’t make it an option. “And now instead of us partying at John’s, I have to go upstairs and try to explain why I’m here. I hope you guys have fun partying down here without me.”

I glared at Danielle and moved past them into the VIP area. Trace led me to a back table where he crossed his arms, but didn’t sit down.

“You sneak in?”

“No, they must’ve thought I was part of the party,” I tried to explain to him. “I was trying to get my friends to leave.”

Trace snorted, “Those aren’t your friends.”

“Yes, they are,” I defended, but deep down inside I knew what he meant.

“I saw you and John acting cozy.”

“We’re just friends,” I whined.

“I know that you know that. I’m just not sure that he knows that. Whatever. We’re not talking about him now. Let me introduce you to someone and then I’ll take you home.”

“I can just take a cab. You shouldn’t leave this party.”

“I’m done with this party anyway. I’m only making an appearance.” He motioned for someone to come over, and I looked over my shoulder to see a boy maybe only a year or two older than me walk over. His pants were three

sizes too big for him and hung so low that I wasn't sure how they were staying on. He had on a Miami Heat jersey and his hair was cropped short to his head. His dark skin and eyes were pure and youthful, and his face looked like it should be on TV or movies. When he stood beside Trace, I could only stare.

"Luc, this is my god daughter, Nelli. He saw the picture of you in my office and wanted to know who you were, so I said I'd introduce him to you."

"It's nice to meet you," his voice was a bit soft. He politely held his hand out for me to shake. I took it and found his palm smooth and cool. I didn't want to take my hand away, but I did so anyway.

"Luc's our latest protégé," Trace explained. "Your dad found him at an open mic night at a club battling another freestylist. He's only seventeen, but he's got a gift. Show her what you can do, Luc."

Luc obliged Trace and went into some freeform rap about being in the VIP section of a club with big name rappers and only being able to focus on the pretty girl in front of him. I looked at Trace who shrugged, "He knows you're off limits. You can't help that you inspire people, Nelli."

Luc looked a bit bashful about the whole episode, but I smiled at him, "You've definitely got a gift."

"Soon the world will see it," Trace said, patting Luc on the shoulder. I could tell that Trace believed completely in Luc. I had seen this look on Trace's face before, the look that said that he was about to create a star. Lucky for Luc, Trace always achieved that goal when he had that look on his face. "You need to stop by the studio tomorrow so we can get your opinion on some of the tracks we're laying down," Trace said.

"Sure," I said. Then I looked into Luc's eyes, "I'd like that very much."

"Me too," he said still looking bashful. Trace hugged him close and then they exchanged some daps before he motioned that it was time for us to leave. I went down the stairs first, knowing that it would take him a few moments to properly say good bye to everyone. To my surprise, John was waiting for me at the bottom.

"You didn't leave?" I asked him.

"Danielle decided we should stay."

"She's really mad at me, huh?"

John let out a sarcastic laugh and took my hand. "She'll get over it. You still up for going back to my place?"

"I can't. Trace is taking me home."

“I figured.” He interlocked his fingers in mine and looked at me for a long period of time before saying anything else. “Nel, there wasn’t someone else was there?”

“What do you mean?”

“The formal. You just said there was someone else so that you could avoid going with me. Right?”

“I just didn’t feel like going with anyone. It wasn’t a personal thing against you,” I reassured him.

“How long are you going to keep doing this?”

I knew he was talking about me avoiding his advances. I wasn’t sure what I was supposed to do about him since he didn’t seem to want to take the hint. Trace arrived by my side, and I pulled my hand away from John’s.

“We’ll talk later,” I told him. John said that was fine, but even as I walked out of the club with Trace, I could feel him staring at me.

Diego

By the time my mom got home that night, I was already in bed trying to get some sleep. She opened the door and thought she had gotten out of our conversation, but I quickly sat up.

“Don’t go,” I said.

She hesitated but came in. She didn’t bother to turn on the light, probably not wanting to have to look me in the eyes, my father’s eyes. She sat on the bed and placed her hand on my arm, rubbing it as if that was going to make everything all better like it would have when I was a little kid and needed to be comforted.

“I thought you would like the studio,” she said.

“So it was your idea?”

“Whose idea did you think it was?”

“His,” I said. “You said in the note he found a good deal.”

The moonlight struggled against my shades to slightly illuminate my mother, and I stared hard at her for her reply. “He did. He looked for me. You have no idea how expensive studios are.”

“I have an idea. Why can’t I meet him?”

“He’s so busy. I’m so busy. There just isn’t time, but we’ll make time, okay?”

“No that’s not okay, Mom. You’re never going to make the time. Who are you ashamed of? Him or me?”

“Diego...”

“No, Mom. Answer me. Are you ashamed of me?”

“Of course not,” she said in an agitated tone. She stood up from my bed and walked over to the window where she could stare at the blinds that were highlighted by the moonlight. “Chris is a really good guy. He’s helped me so much, and you. You don’t know how many times he’s helped with the bills, or even with little things, like making sure the oil is changed in my car. I talk about you all the time. He knows you’re my world.”

“So then you’re ashamed of him? What’s wrong with him?”

I could see her dry her eyes. She turned and stretched her hands out in frustration. “Nothing. Yet. I just don’t want you to know him yet. I don’t want to get your hopes up that this great guy has come into our lives, to help us, to take care of us, and then have him abandon us.”

“That’s not fair, Mom. That’s not fair to me, and that’s not fair to Chris. And it’s been over a year! If you haven’t figured all that out by now, then when are you going to?”

“I don’t know, baby.” She sat back down on my bed, and I put my arms around her. “I’m scared.”

“Stop being scared,” I said as I held her close. It was weird how she smelled like wine and flowers, but I couldn’t remember at that moment what my mom had smelled like before she had started seeing Chris. Then another thought occurred to me, and I became very disconcerted. I realized at that moment that my mom was partially lying to me, if not completely lying altogether, but I just kept holding her. I didn’t voice my suspicions when she finally wished me good night and left to go to her room.

As I lay in bed that night, sleep didn’t come to me because all I could think was that the problem was me after all. My mom didn’t want me to meet Chris because she was scared that I wouldn’t like him, and if I didn’t like him, then she wouldn’t stay with him. I stayed up the entire night thinking of all the possible reasons that I wouldn’t like him that would cause her to be so cautious about our meeting.

9: INSPIRATION

Nikki

Diego decided to christen the studio with a pizza party for me, Nelli, and Elvis. Elvis had brought his camera and was taking pictures of the space for posterity before Diego filled it with canvases and paintings and easels and drawings. Nelli had brought her Monopoly game for us to play, and she was currently setting it up while I moved the empty pizza boxes out of the way.

“There’s no way my mom’s going to let me come over here all the time.” Elvis looked bummed, and I didn’t blame him. Sometimes it sucked that he had a mom who was always home.

“Have you gone on any auditions lately?” I asked him.

“Nah. But we’re flying to LA during Spring Break.”

Nelli looked at Elvis with understanding. “Mami normally has a lot of auditions lined up for me, as well, but she’s been busy with this big fashion event that she’s been put in charge of. It’s kind of nice to have the pressure off for now.”

“Yeah, I get that,” Elvis said.

For a minute I didn’t get it, but then I realized that it was probably no different than the pressure I put on myself whenever I had a test or a big project. I looked at Diego who looked between Elvis and Nelli as they conversed. Really he only looked at Nelli with an occasional glance at Elvis.

“So what’s your first art piece going to be?” I asked him to get his attention on me. It worked for the moment.

“I’m not sure. Maybe I’ll paint what the studio looks like now.”

“Oh, that reminds me,” Elvis said, getting up from the floor and going over to where he had placed a large object covered in brown paper, “I brought you a studio-warming present.” He placed the flat object on the floor in front of Diego and sat back down.

Diego ripped apart the brown paper-bag wrapping and there before him lay the art project that the three of us had had worked on together for class. We had created a multi-medium rendering of Vizcaya. In the center was the large painting that Diego had created with the gardens and Nelli standing in front of the largest fountain. Around it were the smaller drawings that I had tried to do of the statues and gates that surrounded the garden, and filling in the empty spaces were the photographs Elvis had taken of us creating the project, including a self-portrait of him in front of the large stairs that led up the mound. We had gotten an A on the project, and Elvis had claimed it for archival purposes, so it was nice to see that he had thought to give it to Diego, who was the true artist among us.

“It’s beautiful,” Nelli said, scooting around toward Diego so she could see it better. “You guys are so talented.”

“It’s really him,” Elvis said in reference to Diego. “It’s easy to paste pictures around a great work of art.”

“Thanks, man,” Diego said to Elvis. He stood up and decided that it should go on the wall over the futon. Elvis and Diego mounted it up, and when they were done, the four of us stood in front of it just staring at the first work of art displayed in his studio.

“So what are you going to call it?” Nelli asked.

“Inspiration,” Diego said.

Nelli went to Diego’s art kit and pulled out a black sharpie. She wrote the name in the furthest right corner of the piece and then handed the sharpie to Diego and insisted that we should all sign it. We each put our names under the word and stood back and stared at it again. I felt a little sick to my stomach knowing that I had contributed to Diego’s inspiration, and that Diego’s inspiration was the girl in the middle of the project.

Nelli

I went from Diego’s studio to Trace’s, from visual art to auditory art. I considered Trace’s condo my second home, so I saw myself in and placed my

bag down on his couch. In the kitchen, I grabbed a bottle of water before climbing the steps into his recording loft.

Trace was hard at work behind the control board with another recording engineer that he always worked with. Luc was on the other side of the glass rhyming to a beat that was hotter than the beats that were out now. Trace was in the middle of creating a hit.

I sat in the couch behind him and unscrewed the lid of my water. I took a drink and watched as Luc moved his hands to the beat as he paced the words that were coming out of his mouth. He had on a black baseball cap that was backward on his head. When Trace cut the song, Luc took off his hat and readjusted it as if that would fix the problem.

“It’s good,” Trace told him through the intercom, “But give me that edge. You know what edge I’m talking about. Stop holding back.” Luc nodded and waited for the music before trying again. He found his edge and delivered a performance that made me easily envision him at the club where my dad had found him. It was strange the kind of power that Luc held, a kind of force that manifested itself from an inner confidence that he had to have been born with. I leaned forward a bit to analyze it more, to feel it more, to try and become a part of that very power. When the song finished, I felt like my blood pulsed in a way it had never pulsed before.

Trace swiveled his chair around and looked at me. “Be honest. What did you think?”

“I think...” I began as I looked past Trace and into the recording booth where Luc looked toward me with his hands on his head as if he too waited for the answer, “...that Luc’s a star.”

Trace patted my knee in thanks before turning around and giving Luc a thumbs up. Luc smiled at Trace and then at me, and my blood pulsed erratically again.

Diego

I sat at the dining table in Nikki’s house and listened to her mom as she answered my question about how things were going at the hospital. Nikki’s mom was a nurse and she worked harder than anyone else I knew. That’s why Nikki had vowed at a very young age to never be a nurse. Of course, Nikki naturally worked hard so she probably would’ve been a great nurse.

“I think I burnt the chicken.” Nikki placed a plate of overly brown chicken breasts on the table followed by a deep dish of roasted potatoes. “The potatoes should be just right, though.” She added small plates of salad for each of us and then a plate with rolls. “Okay, dig in.”

I served myself the food and thanked Nikki as I tried the chicken. It was tough but edible, and she’d had been right about the potatoes. They were perfect.

“You did a great job,” her mother said as she ate her salad.

“You really didn’t have to do this,” I reiterated to her, and she reiterated that she had wanted to.

Nikki’s mom was nice enough to not bring up the studio or my mom except to ask how she was doing in that polite way that parents always inquire about other parents. I told her she was fine and she moved the subject to what movie Nikki and I planned to watch tonight in the living room.

Along with the invitation to dinner came the insistence by Nikki’s mom that I stay the night in the guest room. I didn’t want to be inconsiderate of the offer so I agreed to stay, even though I told Nikki that I didn’t appreciate the charity. Nikki had said that her mom worried about me and that I needed to accept it.

I helped Nikki clear the dishes and rinse them off before putting them in the dishwasher, then her mom went to sleep and Nikki and I went to the living room to watch a movie, or at least pick one from her DVD collection that we both could agree on watching. We finally decided on *Jurassic Park* and put it on as we sat side-by-side on her couch. She had changed into a tank top and shorts pajama set and had put her blonde hair up into a messy bun.

I had a lot that I wanted to tell Nikki at that moment, a lot I wanted to confess to her. Nelli had kissed me at the studio, but she had kissed me again after that as well, and I had kissed her back and started a new sketch of her. Before Nikki had invited me for dinner, I had thought that I would call her over so that I could tell her what had happened, and then I was going to suggest that maybe we should take a break from each other.

Being invited for dinner, however, reminded me of everything that I adored about Nikki. I didn’t know what to do because I had no idea what was even happening.

“Do you remember,” Nikki said, “when we were younger. We’d play hide and seek in the dark with flashlights? We thought it’d be like a scary movie, and I would scream because even though I knew it was you, it would always

freak me out when I found you. It was so messed up because I was the one seeking and you were the one hiding.”

“I do remember,” I said. “You’d scream worse when you were the one hiding.”

“I wish we could play that now, but I don’t want to wake my mom.”

“We could play if you promised not to scream.”

“You and I both know that isn’t going to happen.”

I laughed and put my arm around her. “There are other games we could play that won’t make you scream.”

“Oh, yeah?” She looked at me and her eyes dropped to my lips and back to my eyes. “Like what?”

I kissed her, and so began our kissing game. I liked the way that Nikki kissed because she put so much emotion into it. It was like everything else she did. She put in the work and got the result. I also liked running my hands through her hair as we kissed, and I liked how she didn’t hesitate to let her hands roam through my hair, on my neck, and down my chest.

Nikki and I were both virgins, and I really wanted to change that at that moment, but it wasn’t the right time or the right place. Maybe some other time, when we weren’t in her mom’s house, and when her mom wasn’t sleeping after a long day of being a nurse, and when we were on something other than a couch, and when Velociraptors weren’t screeching in the background.

10: VALENTINE'S

Nelli

Every year, since we were little kids, John always gave me a candy bracelet and a special card for Valentines. His mother once told me that she thought it was odd when her barely seven-year-old son insisted he needed to get a special card, a grown-up Valentine's card, with flowers and lace and pretty words on it just for me. This Valentine's was no different. I opened the card and read the note, which was the same note that seven-year-old John had written back then: Happy Heart Day.

I closed my locker and looked down the hall to see Lindsey and Danielle talking at their lockers. Danielle gave me a dirty look and said something to Lindsey before walking away. I walked over to Lindsey and handed her a Strawberry Shortcake valentine.

She handed me a heart-shaped pink box with Sweet Tarts inside. "Danielle's still upset."

"I can see that," I told her. I placed the heart box on the folder I held against my chest. Considering it had been a couple of weeks since the club incident, she should've been over it by now.

"You really have changed, Nel," Lindsey said almost timidly.

Lindsey and I had also been friends for a long time. She had impressed me in our elementary school years when she showed off her amazing cartwheeling skills. After she had pulled off a flawless front somersault, I had claimed her as my friend.

“Just because I didn’t go with John to the formal? Seriously? You guys know that I don’t like him like that.”

“But he’s your friend. And you go with him because you don’t want your friend to go stag.”

I didn’t understand this logic. “I think you guys are overreacting about the whole thing. It’s just a stupid formal.”

Lindsey’s eyes widened as if I had proven her point, “Old Nel never would’ve said that it was just a stupid formal. Maybe Danielle is right.”

Danielle is never right. About anything. Lindsey knew that for a fact. “Sure,” I said not wanting to discuss this any further, “Let’s just say Danielle is right then. Have a happy Valentine’s.”

I walked away from her and went to class. I sat down and let my notebook drop onto my desk. The box of Sweet Tarts shook upon impact and I picked it up and looked at the note that Lindsey had written on it: *Happy V-Day, Nel. Stay sweet.*

I suddenly felt like a bad person, but I knew that I hadn’t changed. Everything about me was exactly the same. I didn’t feel any different than I had felt at fourteen, and I had enough experience in turning new ages to know that nothing drastic or dramatic happened once the clock struck the hour of your birth. My friends were either going insane, or they had been the ones that had changed and couldn’t see that I had stayed exactly the same.

As I re-read Lindsey’s note, I tried to convince myself that maybe that’s what had actually happened. John had stayed my friend even though I had turned down every single advance he had ever made to me. Lindsey had stayed my friend even though she knew that I was responsible for the boy of her dreams never asking her out in middle school because I convinced him to ask me out instead. Danielle had stayed my friend even though I threw a fit and made her not wear a dress that would have looked better on her than me to a party. I was still that person, and yet somehow, now, because I didn’t take John to the formal, they chose to start disliking me? Something was very wrong with this picture.

Nikki

After the awesome and romantic gift that Diego had given me for Christmas, I didn’t expect much from him for Valentine’s. Last year, our first official Valentine’s as a couple, he had given me these cute-cute-CUTE-pink earrings

shaped like hearts. He had also drawn me a Valentine's card that had two little birds kissing with a rainbow over them.

As I did customarily, I gave out Strawberry Shortcake valentines. I had a very efficient method when it came to valentines disbursement that involved making sure I had my closest friends and favorite teachers covered, and then taking the remaining valentines and giving them to the people least likely to receive valentines at all. That was how I had become friends with Elvis back in elementary school. He had received my last valentine, and I had found out that he rode my school bus. Some things were just meant to be.

For Diego, I had a small red paper bag that I had filled with candy hearts. I had taped his valentine to the front, and I had also gotten him a gift that I had wrapped in red wrapping paper with a silver heart design on it. The gift was a salt and pepper shaker set that said "you" and "me" on them. I thought the sentiment was romantic, plus he needed them for his studio. What Diego didn't know was that I had saved the best present for later when we were alone in his studio.

As always, I expected Diego to be in late, so I was caught off guard when I opened my locker after second period and found a single rose, a drawing of a garden full of hearts instead of flowers, and a small gift. I opened the gift immediately to discover a bracelet with little heart charms dangling on it. Today was the best day ever. I strutted into third with a smile wider than the Atlantic and sat down. I immediately put the bracelet on and dangled it for my viewing pleasure.

"Oooh, did Diego give that to you?" The little red-head girl that was in all my classes asked.

I gave her an affirmative nod, and she leaned in to inspect it.

"God, you're so lucky." She turned to her friend, and they talked about how lucky I was.

Somehow I felt that they weren't saying this in a very nice way. I didn't care, however. What I did care about was being summoned in the middle of class to the front office. My mind immediately thought of Diego, and I almost burst into the office asking, "What did he do?"

As it turned out, this had nothing to do with Diego at all. My guidance counselor wanted to speak to me and felt that it would be best to do so in the middle of third.

"How are you, Nikki?" Mrs. McCloud asked me.

I always liked Mrs. McCloud and had I known I was going to see her today I would've given her a valentine, as well. "I'm fine. Is something wrong?"

"No, not at all," she said with a comforting smile. "In fact, everything is very much right. Your GPA last semester was the highest for your class."

It was? That couldn't be possible. There were a ton of people in our class. I would swear that we had the largest student population of any public school in the Miami-Dade area. The portables lined up on any available spot on campus proved that.

"Congratulations. Of course, you also made the Dean's List."

Well that was no surprise. I always tended to make the Dean's List. "Are you sure I have the highest GPA? It's not a computer glitch?"

Mrs. McCloud found me amusing. "No computer glitch. Now I know you're just a sophomore, but you really need to start planning for your future. With your GPA and the prospect of you being Valedictorian in a couple of years, you should really start choosing extra-curricular activities that will give your school record the edge to beat out others when you're ready to apply to college."

"College?" Was she talking to me about me? My head spun.

"I know you probably haven't started thinking about it yet, but the earlier you get your clubs and classes together, the better shot you will have to make it into any school you want. Nikki, you're Ivy material."

Ivy material? Me? "Wait," I said as my mind raced and tried to catch random information whizzing by. "What about Jason Cuevas? Jason Cuevas has got to have a higher GPA than me."

Mrs. McCloud wanted to laugh at me. I could tell. "Nikki, I'm not saying you don't have competition, but it is my job to help you succeed, and there's no reason you cannot achieve this. Haven't you ever dreamt of going to an Ivy?"

Sure. In that off-handed way someone dreams of owning an island where they can raise puppies and play on the beach all day. "I don't work hard because I want to," I tried to explain to her. "I work hard because I just do. I don't see the point of coming here every day and not doing what they tell you to do."

I imagined I wasn't making much sense to the lady. All she had wanted was for me to come in and tell her that she gave me the best news ever and that I would do whatever she told me to ensure that Harvard begged me to go to its school.

Mrs. McCloud observed me as she tried to figure out what the problem could be. “What do you want to be when you grow up? What do you want to do with your life?”

All I could focus on at the moment was the bracelet with the heart charms dangling from my wrist. What did I want to be? What did I want to do? I wanted to be the girl that Diego had to draw, and paint, and bring to life on his canvases.

“I don’t know yet,” I said as I looked back at Mrs. McCloud. “But I promise that I’ll figure it out.”

“I’m sure you will,” she said, but she suddenly didn’t look so convinced either.

Diego

Nikki didn’t know that I had a Valentine’s surprise for her. I had laid a sea blue blanket over the hardwood floor and arranged the Chinese take-out. I had lit candles all around the studio and had tried very hard to make the mood as romantic as possible. This included taking any paintings of Nelli I had started and removing them from the easels and putting them on the floor so that the art faced the wall. I replaced those paintings with other work I had occasionally been inspired to start: a fountain with several birds on it, a garden with nothing but daisies, South Beach’s art deco architecture at night.

Upon her arrival, she remarked how she loved it all, how the mood was perfect, how the food was perfect, how I, in essence, was perfect. She had on tan corduroys and a black sweater that offset the charm necklace I had given her on Christmas. She was also wearing the bracelet that I had left for her today. When I reached my hand across to move her hair behind her ear, I saw the pink heart earrings I had given her last Valentine’s. She had come prepared. She looked radiant and happy, and my lips sought some of this positive energy, first on her neck, then up her jaw line, and her earlobe as I sucked on it softly.

“Diego,” she said with a whisper. “I have one more thing to give you.”

I didn’t stop my actions as I asked her what it was. I just moved my head so that I could begin to repeat my kissing on the other side.

“I think it’s time. I’m ready.”

I stopped kissing and pulled away just enough to move my face to hers, our noses almost touching, our breaths intermingling. “Nikki...”

“I thought about this. I want you to be my first. You have no idea how much I care about you, and I know you’re the right person, and this is the right time.”

There were a lot of problems with this picture. The mood had been set, but when I had set it, I had thought that Nikki and I were just in for another heavy make-out session. I had thought about my first time a million times, and it always involved being at my house on a night I knew my mom wouldn’t be home. I never envisioned it on Valentine’s, which seemed way too cliché to be meaningful. The other problem involved us being surrounded by paintings and drawings of Nelli, even though they were all facing the wall. Not to mention the fact that the painting of Vizcaya was directly over the futon and Nelli was in the center of it.

The biggest problem, however, was how I kept thinking about these things as I agreed and led Nikki to the futon. I clumsily helped her take off her sweater and nervously unzipped her pants, and stumbled as I took off my own jeans. I kissed her too quick, touched her too hard, and almost killed the mood twice. First when I couldn’t figure out how to get the condom on right, and second when I fell off the suddenly-too-small futon as I was trying to get in the best position possible.

I pushed the warning signs out of my mind while Nikki and I had sex for the first time, but when it was all said and done, and as I lay there, holding her against me on the futon and smelling the lingering scents of the candles as they all burnt out, what I did realize was that everything between the two of us had just changed forever. In the back of my mind, I hoped that it had changed for the better and not for the worse, because it had felt right and exactly as everything should’ve been.

11: MR. ALVAREZ'S HOUSE

Nelli

Nikki and Diego had had sex. It was obvious in the way they held hands as we walked around the mall, the way he dropped a kiss on her cheek or lips unexpectedly, the way he suddenly looked at her more than me, the way that he would put his hand on her lower back as they stopped to look at something. I had never remembered feeling this jealous in my whole entire life.

Nikki had initiated it. I knew that because when it came to Diego, Nikki initiated everything. At the perfume counter, I spritzed some perfume onto my wrist and waved it a little before smelling it. It was a fruity fragrance, a fruity, fun, and spirited fragrance. I looked over toward Nikki as she tried a different one and then at Diego as he smelled her wrist. He didn't care for it, and I walked over and put my wrist in front of him.

"What do you think of this one?" I asked him.

He smelled it and approved. "It's fruity. You should try that one, Nik."

Oh this would not do at all. I pointed it out to her and she went to try it, putting it on her wrist, and getting the subsequent seal of approval from Diego. I realized that I had underestimated Nikki. I should've known that she'd pull the sex card to get his attention back on her. She wasn't a stupid girl. She had seen the paintings, the drawings, the looks, the attention to detail, and she had made her move. Her move was the best move. It would be hard to get Diego's attention back on me now, but I wasn't too concerned just yet.

“So what are you guys doing for Spring Break?” I asked them as we walked through the department store.

“What we always do,” Nikki answered. “Sleep in and go to the beach when we finally get up.”

“That’s what I do, too,” I informed them. “Our family owns an island in the Keys. You guys should come with me.” Normally I’d invite my friends to go with me, but this year I had already told them that I wasn’t doing it. Or at least I had told Lindsey and John. Danielle still wasn’t talking to me.

“What do you mean your family owns an island?” Diego asked.

It had been Papi’s idea. He had wanted a place where he could fish without being interrupted by phone calls, visitors, or any demands from the office or artists or industry execs. He called it his “peace of mind” island, and the only way to get there was by boat. The island wasn’t very big at all. It only took about fifteen minutes to walk the circumference, but to Papi it was paradise. I explained this all to Nikki and Diego, and Nikki responded in the only way most people could whenever we invited them.

“Well how can we say no to that?”

Diego agreed.

Diego

When I got home from hanging out with Nikki and Nelli at the mall, Mr. Alvarez was outside watching one of his grandsons ride a Big Wheel. He waved at me and motioned for me to go over to him. I walked to him and stood beside him as I crossed my arms and watched his grandson pretend that the Big Wheel was a race car in the Daytona 500.

“How are you, Diego? I haven’t seen you around as much.”

“I’m fine. Everything’s fine.”

“Your mother told me you spend all your time in a studio now.”

I hadn’t been aware that my mother had even been home long enough to hold a conversation with Mr. Alvarez. “Yeah, an art studio.”

It was warm outside, and sunny, and I wanted to get inside and trade out my jeans for my cargo shorts. But I didn’t want to be rude.

“At your age, if someone had given me a studio, I never would have come home,” Mr. Alvarez said knowingly. He gave me a side-glance while he kept his focus on his grandson.

“Maybe that’s why your parents never gave you one,” I pointed out. He chuckled and put his large hand on my back in a gesture that was as close to a hug as he felt he could give me given that I wasn’t really his family. I appreciated his attempts. “So what else have you and my mom talked about?” I bet she would let him meet Chris.

“How she’s doing well. Is she doing well?”

“I think so.” I had no idea if my mom was doing well. He knew that.

“My wife is making *bistec* tonight. You should stay for dinner. The little ones are staying the night and I think they’d like having a bigger boy around.”

“You just want me to be a babysitter,” I joked. I couldn’t get out of the invitation, mostly because Mr. Alvarez was so nice that I felt it would just be too rude to make up a lie. I went home and changed into something more comfortable before heading back to Mr. Alvarez’s house.

The inside of his house was homey even with the pale furniture and excessive light brought in by the Florida room that he led me into. The windows were open, and a healthy spring breeze flowed in, making me feel fresh and alive. The kids were huddled around the TV where they were playing a dance video game that relied completely on coordination and not on actual rhythm. I could smell the Caribbean spices being used for the meal, as well as the grilling of onions and the familiar aroma of the steak that Mrs. Alvarez cooked. These were all smells that my mom used to create when I was younger. Somehow they had disappeared the older I got.

“Do you know how to play?” one of the little girls asked me.

I told her that I had an idea. I had played this game before as an arcade version in a movie theater. The kids let me go next, eager to see someone who wasn’t their height look ridiculous trying to keep up with the scrolling directional arrows. I must’ve done the trick because the kids laughed as my feet began to move in a hundred directions, but the laughs turned into sentiments of awe when they realized that I was getting the moves right. When they saw my score, they cheered and jumped up and down asking me to do it again.

After a full hour of this, I was ravenous. We sat at the table to eat, and I devoured food that tasted better than anything since my mother used to cook. I think Mr. Alvarez knew this because before I left that night to go back home, he made sure that his wife packed up enough of the food to last me a week. I thanked them both, told the kids to have fun without me, and went back to my quiet, dark, empty house.

Nikki

Long before Diego and I became a couple, we used to talk on the phone at night, quietly hoping we wouldn't get caught. Now, neither of us ever feared being caught anymore, but our nightly conversations had waned over the course of our relationship. Since the night in the studio, however, we found ourselves back on the phone at night, talking about nothing that important, but just wanting to be as close as we could be as we listened to the other's voice.

"Mrs. McCloud wants me to run for class president. Isn't that nuts? Me as the junior class president?"

"I think it makes sense. You'd be great at it."

"I don't know," I played with the seams of my decorative heart-shaped pillow that I had had since I was about six years old. "I don't know if I'm president material. Treasurer yes, but president? I don't think people would vote for me."

"They would. People like you, Nikki. You're nice, and you pay attention to them. That's all the kids in school want."

"But still," I lay in my bed in the pitch black of my room and wondered why I was so hesitant to even try. Normally, I would give something a shot, even if I didn't think I had a good chance at succeeding. "Are you coming to school next year?"

"I will if you're the president of our class."

I smiled, even though I knew it was twisted logic. "That's bribery. What if I lost? Would you still be there?"

"You wouldn't lose, Nik."

"Would you be my campaign manager? You could make my flyers and stuff."

"I think Elvis would be better as campaign manager, but I could definitely do the flyers and stuff."

"It sounds like it could be fun."

"It would be. Did I tell you what I ended up doing for dinner?"

I listened to him tell me about his adventure at Mr. Alvarez's house and just hearing how happy and satiated he sounded in his voice was calming enough to lull me to sleep that night.

12: THE ISLAND

Nikki

The island exceeded all of my expectations. Once my feet went from the yacht to the long wooden dock, I removed my super large superstar sunglasses and stared at what was in front of me. I had been expecting a white, sandy atoll with a lone palm in the middle. Instead I just saw green. Lots of green. Trees everywhere and no beach in sight. I got my ultra-cute navy and white tote from the island keeper who had taken us to the island on a small motor boat. Diego jumped off the boat with our duffel bags then helped Nelli out.

The island resembled a lush oasis surrounded by water so shallow that the water was clear and the white sand was completely visible. I couldn't imagine the water coming up past my ankles. Around the shallow edges the water began to darken into various shades of blue, but never too dark to be considered deep ocean.

Diego and I followed Nelli through the trees and lush vegetation before coming upon the grassy clearing that had the house. The three story house appeared to be made solely out of wooden planks. The bottom floor sat mostly open and exposed completely to the elements, while the top floor seemed to be a deck and observation floor. My mind had a hard time comprehending what dimension we had crossed into that made sense for this place to exist.

Nelli led Diego and I to separate rooms. "There are five rooms," she explained, "There's no need to share."

I walked into the room she had deemed mine and dropped my tote onto the perfectly made pristine white bed. I wondered who had made it and kept up the house since Nelli and her family didn't live there. I walked to the wide open window and placed my hands on the sill so I could lean forward and get the full view. The salty breeze flew straight off the ocean and mixed with the clean breath of the plenteous leaves on the island.

The trees helped to filter the sea salt, making the ocean smell a little sweet and very refreshing. From my room, I could see several other small keys, like the one we were on, and then nothing but the expanse of the blue ocean into the horizon. It was midday and the sun burned bright, but there were large white cumulus clouds keeping the rays from being too strong.

"What do you think?" Diego asked as he came behind me and wrapped his arms around my waist. "I think you got the nicer view. I can only see water from mine."

"I feel like I'm in a dream."

He gave me a kiss on the cheek and then we were interrupted by Nelli telling us that lunch had been set up for us. Diego took my hand and together we followed Nelli down the stairs and to the open area of the first floor. There were comfortable couches with palm tree patterned pillows and cushions, as well as glass tables and large floor lamps that gave the area a sun-drenched illumination. On the glass table was a spread of small finger sandwiches, various potato chips, a fresh fruit bowl and a pitcher of water. There was also a bottle of wine and three wine glasses waiting for us.

"This is amazing," I said as I sat on the couch beside Diego. Nelli sat in a cozy armchair to the side of me. "Do you ever get tired of living like this?"

"Yes," Nelli said as she grabbed one of the finger sandwiches and took off a little piece with her fingers. She demurely put it in her mouth, the way she would eat the rest of her meal.

"What's tiring about it?" Diego leaned forward to make himself a plate of food.

"All of it. When your family owns an island, people expect things from you. When your family owns a mansion in Coconut Grove, people expect things from you. People never seem to understand that none of this is really mine. I grew up playing here, living there, but it's not where I would choose to play or where I would choose to live. I don't know. I guess it's hard to explain."

"No, I get it," Diego said. "It's your parents' life not yours."

I didn't get it. It sounded like poor-little-rich-girl syndrome to me. "But one day, this will probably be yours. I mean, like inheritance or something." I realized how morbid that sounded, and I saw how Nelli threw a glare in my direction, but I didn't back down or apologize for it.

"I don't know and I don't care," she said finally. She finished the last bit of the finger sandwich.

"If I lived here, I would never leave," Diego said as he started in on his potato chips.

"There's definitely a lot of inspiration here," Nelli said.

I wanted to tell her that obviously Diego would find inspiration here.

"Aren't you going to eat?" Nelli asked me. She grabbed a potato chip and broke it in half so she could nibble on it.

"I think I want to explore first. Do you mind?"

"No, go ahead," she said. "You have free reign. Go wherever you like."

I looked at Diego who motioned he wanted to finish eating, and I left them there as I went to explore the island.

Diego

Too many images, too many visions, too many ideas running around my brain. I wanted to paint it all, document it all, recreate it so that if I ever wanted to come here again I wouldn't have to step foot outside of the studio to do so. My body reacted with excitement as I walked barefoot on moist and tender leafy grass and then through the squishy and slimy murky yellow water that surrounded the mangrove trees around the island. Finally, I reached the warm open water and the soft sand.

Nelli introduced Nikki to a whole new level of sunbathing when she put the lawn chairs in the water so that they could work on their tans. I began to play a game with myself where I would pick a random part of the island and walk straight out into the water, trying to judge how far I could go before the water reached my chest.

Then I played another game where I followed an entire school of tiny silver and white fish as they zigzagged around me and through the water. I found a prickly auburn crab trying to burrow its way into the sand beside my feet and watched sailboats and motor boats float by. I waved to a small boat after the man in it had initiated the formality.

When I had finally convinced myself that I was no longer dreaming, I saw a dolphin jump in the air and disappear back into the sparkling water, ruining the illusion of reality once more. I went back to where the girls were still tanning, and I playfully splashed water on them, causing them both to screech and get up and run after me. We ran through the water like the most carefree people in the entire planet, and at that moment, I doubted that anyone was more at peace than we were.

Nelli

I had saved the best part of the island for last. As the sun began to set, I led Nikki and Diego through the water to the trail we had used to reach the open water. Beside it was the other dock, which had been covered in sand to simulate a real beach. We sat on the dock and watched the sun as the sky slowly dissolved from blue, to splashes of lavender, and rose, and fire, and then back to a dark blue. I knew that Diego would be out here tomorrow at the same time, trying to catch this moment with paint.

Once the sun had set, we walked back to the main house where the maid had set up dinner. The three of us took the opportunity to quickly shower and change before meeting again on the base floor. I found myself smiling a lot as Diego finished his fish so fast that the maid quickly had to make him another.

“She doesn’t have to...”

“It’s not a problem,” I told him before he could protest further. “It’s good fish, you should eat as much of it as you can.”

“Does she live here when you guys aren’t around?” Nikki asked.

“She doesn’t live here at all. After dessert she’ll leave the island. Then she’ll return in the morning for breakfast.”

“Why not just let her stay?” Diego asked.

“She has her own home to go to. Her own family. We don’t own her.”

Sometimes their questions made me wonder just how evil they thought my family was. They definitely didn’t understand my life, but that was part of what I liked so much about them. The things that I didn’t even notice, they did, and they brought the invisible to my attention. Like the rose on my bedpost.

“What’s the craziest thing you’ve done on this island?” Nikki asked, changing the subject.

“Duh,” I said with a smirk, “Run around naked.”

“I want to do that,” Diego said, and Nikki’s mouth fell open in happy shock.

I laughed because the way he had said it had shown how excited he was by the prospect of doing it.

“We’ll do it tomorrow,” I assured them. “It’s better in the daytime.”

“I don’t know if I could,” Nikki said.

“Trust me,” I told her with the full knowledge of an experienced pro, “you can do it. And once you do it, you’ll never want to put your clothes back on.”

“I believe that,” Diego said as he poured himself more wine.

I was glad he did believe it, because it was the truth. The bigger truth was that I would be the one most wanting for him to not put his clothes back on.

“Do you think that if you wanted to,” Nikki asked, “That your dad would let you stay here forever?”

“I would never want to.”

“But it’s paradise,” Nikki said. I hadn’t really noticed anything different about Nikki’s demeanor since we had arrived that afternoon, but now I wondered if her questions and odd topics had more to do with her trying to comprehend how she would leave here and go back to normal. She really liked this island. I understood.

“It’s paradise because you don’t live here every day. It’s special because you can come here and disappear, but disappearing isn’t paradise unless you’re visible all the time.”

“But isn’t it a matter of preference?” she persisted. “What if you’re the type of person that likes to be invisible? Maybe then you would think it was paradise to come out into the real world every now and then for sensory stimulation before you disappeared again for long periods of time?”

She made a great point. I had never thought of that before. “I guess that’s just not me.”

Diego stopped eating and looked at Nikki as if hoping to figure out her present thoughts.

“Is that you?” I asked her.

“I don’t know.” She grabbed a piece of the sliced Cuban bread on the table. “Maybe it is. I just don’t think I’d mind living someplace like this and going to the mainland like once a month or something.”

RIVERA

I watched her butter her bread in silence and then I looked at Diego, who was still staring at her. He finally said, “I think I’m that person.”

“I don’t think you are,” I told him. I felt Nikki’s eyes quickly dart to mine, but I kept my gaze on Diego. “You’d never find new inspiration if you stayed in one place too long. Especially a place like this.”

The maid came out with Diego’s new fish and placed it in front of him, and then she took the water pitcher so that she could refill it. He never responded to my observation or theory.

13: THE LAST SUNSET

Nikki

Time stood still on the island, and each day brought a new adventure. Streaking among the palm trees, fishing from the dock, snorkeling around the island, kayaking as the sun set to the right of us. I didn't want to leave, but at the same time, I didn't want to stay either. It was Nelli's island, and part of me believed that she brought us here so that she could lure Diego by prancing in front of him with no clothes on or by sun bathing with a bikini that would hold his attention. She even acted like the damsel in distress when we were swimming. It seemed too staged to be an innocent invitation.

The island had a pool, which seemed redundant at first, but then I understood the need to swim in fresh and controlled chlorinated water after drenching yourself in the salt of the sea. It was nice not to have my personal space constantly invaded by fish and crabs and algae.

I swam some laps before Nelli joined me. She sat on a pool shelf, holding a piña colada in her hand. I had learned that Nelli didn't really like to get her hair wet.

"Is Diego coming?" I asked her.

"He's on the dock painting the island next door."

"That makes sense," I said as I treaded water.

"I'm really glad you guys came," Nelli said.

"You keep telling us that."

Nelli smiled and drank more of her piña colada. She placed it on the edge of the pool then looked down at the water as she let her feet kick around. “It’s different when it’s you guys. I feel like I can just really relax. My other friends always expect me to be the one that knows what to do. They’re always looking at me.”

Was she trying to bait me? Diego always looked at her, and even I couldn’t help but to look at her. “Do you get off on lying like that?” I asked her. I pulled myself up on the ledge of the pool and sat beside her as I looked at her. “Diego’s always looking at you, and I’m always looking at you. You demand to be looked at. Poor Elvis can’t even talk when he’s around you. So is the truth then that you like us because we look at you and your friends are used to you so they stopped looking?”

I caught her off guard.

“I didn’t mean looking like that. I mean that my friends look at me to see what I’m doing so they can do it, too. You guys don’t do that.”

“Your friends sound like they need lives of their own.”

“Do you have friends outside of Diego and Elvis?”

No. I had many acquaintances, many people in my classes that I was nice to and sometimes sat with during lunch, but friends? Not even remotely. “Of course.”

“You never talk about them.”

“There’s not much to say about them.”

A seagull flew overhead, squawking, breaking the sudden silence that fell between us. Then Nelli slid into the pool and redid her hair higher up in a bun on her head. “I’ve never had a real best friend,” she said as she did this. “I think people consider me their best friend, but I’ve never considered them one back.”

“Diego’s always been my only best friend.”

“You’re lucky,” she said and then she put her hands over her head in a perfect ballet position and pretended to do a turn in the water, laughing when she didn’t make it all the way around. “You ever take ballet?”

“No,” I told her.

“Mami made me take it for years. She used to go around telling people I was her little ballerina. I think she liked saying that to people.”

“Was this before or after she went around telling people you were her little princess?”

Nelli found that question amusing and did her turn again, this time completing it perfectly. “I’ve seen your room, Nikki. I’m not the only spoiled princess on this island.”

It was my turn to be amused. I slipped into the pool, going under and completing a perfect handstand and somersault. I surfaced and smoothed my blonde hair back. I could tell Nelli wanted to try to do it. She probably wanted to do it even better than me, but she wouldn’t because of her hair. And because she could do dance moves that I never could and somehow that was good enough for her.

Diego

My hand hurt from all the drawing and painting. I punished my hand by making it work faster than ever before, but I didn’t want to miss anything. The colors changed so fast on the island, blurring from sparkling to saturated to salted and voided. Nature never stayed the same, which was why I had to capture it. There had to be a record, some proof that once upon a time, the sea, or the fish, or the small shark that passed below my feet once existed.

I never would have left the dock. Nikki knew that because each time she would check up on me, she would bring me a cool bottle of water and apply more suntan lotion on my back and shoulders, giving me a much needed massage in the process.

“You’re going to hate tomorrow,” she said from behind me. Her words trickled into my ear like a smooth wind. “Or tonight, if you try and sleep on your back.”

“I’ll be alright,” I told her. Even though her touch and massage had felt amazing, my hand never stopped adding detail to the mangrove tree that seemed to be a lifeline into the water.

She came around to sit beside me and peek at my drawing. Then she dropped a kiss on my shoulder and asked me the most random question. “Do you have any friends outside of me and Elvis?”

“Elvis is really your friend,” I pointed out as I shaded in the recesses of the mangrove’s bark.

“Do you have any friends outside of me then?”

“Not really.” I could only imagine why she suddenly wanted to know this. Whenever I left her and Nelli alone together, Nikki suddenly had a new slew of random questions.

“So would you say that would make me your best friend?”

“I guess. Unless you’re looking for a reason to buy one of those girly necklaces that you split in half, in which case, no.”

She laughed and scooted closer to the edge of the dock and then froze as she looked down into the water. “Is that a shark?”

“Yeah. I named him Buddy, and he’s been lurking around for a while. I think he lives under the dock.”

I didn’t know the names of different types of sharks, so I couldn’t really tell Nikki what kind of shark Buddy happened to be. I could only describe him as small, gray, and sort of flat. He looked pretty harmless.

“I think it’s fitting that Buddy lives under Nelli’s dock,” Nikki said.

I made the kind of noise a cat would make when it was ready to claw someone’s eyes out, and Nikki flipped me off before she looked back at Buddy.

“Seriously. Don’t tell me you didn’t realize that this was all a big set up to get you here so that she could see you naked or shirtless all the time.”

“So then why did she invite you?”

“Because I’m your girlfriend, and you wouldn’t have come without me. She’s been trying to get you since day one. It’s always been about you.”

I added some yellow highlights to the murky mangrove water in my painting. “Then why didn’t you say no when I asked if you wanted us to go?”

“Because I don’t want to be the jealous type.” She shifted so she faced me again, no longer interested in Buddy’s activities. “How is it possible that this water makes your eyes look so much bluer?”

I glanced at her with a silly smile before mixing the burnt sienna in with the murky yellow and speckles of blue clarity. “The same way this sun makes your hair look so much blonder.”

She pretended to swoon and then crawled over to me to give me a kiss that felt so much warmer than the sun and so much sweeter than the sea salt on her lips would indicate. I dropped my paint brush and let my fingers find its new instrument in the strands of her damp hair. For that moment on the dock, I forgot all about my paints, and the mangroves, and Buddy swimming beneath us. There only existed blue and blonde, and her and me, and warm and wet, and sweet and salt.

Nelli

After our last sunset on the island, Nikki went to take a shower. Diego stayed on the dock finishing the painting he had started of the sunset. He had been hard to get alone the entire trip. Either alone with his art, or alone with Nikki, he never seemed to be alone with just himself.

“Do you think you’ll keep painting the island?” I asked him as I moved over to the spot that Nikki had vacated. “Even after you’re back in Miami?”

“I think I will,” he said, and even as the sunlight disappeared and the dark engulfed us, he kept his eyes on the painting. “I think it’ll be easy to envision all over again, even from the studio.”

“I can’t wait to come over and see them all. I love going to your studio.”

He said nothing to this, and I knew that I had to do something dramatic to get him to react. So I leaned into him, just as I had in his studio, and gave him a kiss similar in intensity as to the very first one I had ever given him. Only this time, he pulled away and sprang to his feet.

“It’s dark. We should get to the house.”

I stood up and grabbed his forearm to keep him in place. “I thought this island would inspire you.”

“It did. Thank you inviting for us.”

“I thought I would inspire you.”

He stayed silent, and we stood there in the dark with the sound of the water lapping against the dock.

“You do,” he finally said. “But, you don’t have to try so hard.” He pulled his arm away and left for the house.

I stood there alone in the dark, on the dock, surrounded by the sounds of the trees and boats and water and birds. He was right of course. I had suddenly felt threatened by Nikki because she had given him something that I hadn’t had the chance to yet. However, the truth remained that Diego had come to the island after all, even though deep down inside he knew that he should have said no for Nikki’s sake.

I had him. I just had to figure out how to get him to exactly where I wanted. I wanted his attention only on me. I wanted his lips only on mine, and I wanted him only in my bed. But what I really wanted, more than anything, was him in my life—my whole life. My family didn’t know about him. My friends didn’t know about him. Only I knew about him, and so long as he was just real to me, he wasn’t real at all. Diego continued to be a fantasy.

14: SWEET SIXTEEN

Nikki

Nelli was up to something. I watched her suspiciously as she came into my house with boxes and shopping bags. She pushed me toward my room and then she shoved a large garment bag at me.

“Put this on. Don’t ask questions,” she said before she left my room.

Completely dumfounded, I did as instructed. I opened the large garment bag and found a dress that had popped straight out of a fairy tale. The gown had a light rose-colored tint with a strapless bodice and a large hoop skirt with frills and lace. Embroidered onto the fabric appeared to be small white abstract patterns. Was she insane?

She burst back into my room with an older woman who carried a large silver case. Nelli was on a mission, and seeing her like this was a little frightening. She tore the garment bag from my hand and released the dress from its hanger as she motioned for me to undress.

“What’s going on here?” I attempted to regain some control over this situation, whatever this situation was.

“No questions,” she said, “Just do what I tell you.” Then she stood in front of me and looked at me. “Just trust me.”

Trust her? Yeah right. However, I took the dress and disappeared into my bathroom to try and put it on. Knowing that the task wouldn’t be as easy as that, Nelli came in a few minutes later to fix the hem and to make sure that each part of the dress fell where it was supposed to. She looked through the mirror at me, and I tried to understand what she saw, or how she interpreted

what she saw, but I couldn't make it out. She took my hand and led me back to my room, where the lady had opened her magical silver box, which turned out to hold all kinds of make-up items.

As the woman got to work on my face, Nelli disappeared again and then returned with another lady who had another silver box. This one had hair things in it. As I sat there and let the two ladies fuss over me, Nelli circled like a hawk, giving directions and making sure that not a single hair dared move out of place. Then the second lady pulled out a dainty, glimmering tiara and put it in my hair, spraying it into place as she made sure it all fell together perfectly. Only then did Nelli say something that finally made sense.

“Happy Sweet Sixteen, Nikki.”

Diego

I had forgotten how inspiring Vizcaya could be, how dream-like it was in quality, yet how realistic it was to the touch. It was kismet that the April showers had disappeared for the day and the sky appeared as blue as it had been back in October when we had first met Nelli here. Per Nelli's instructions, I was in a crème colored guayabera shirt with khaki pants and patent leather brown shoes. Beside me, Elvis stood ready with his camera, also dressed as Nelli had advised in his white polo shirt and brown slacks. My phone rang and I picked it up. The girls had arrived.

We met them at the front entrance and I stopped in my steps as I saw Nikki in her rose-colored gown and the tiara that rivaled the shininess of the long blond hair falling around her shoulders. I had once played a video game, or read a fantasy book, or watched a fantasy movie that had a princess who looked just as Nikki looked at this moment.

“So she has you guys in on this.” Nikki's green eyes gave away her annoyance and intrigue all at once.

“Happy birthday, baby,” I said. I leaned forward to give her a kiss, which became the first of many moments that day that Elvis would capture with his camera.

“First, the photo shoot,” Nelli said, grabbing Nikki's arm and snapping at Elvis to follow along quickly. I walked behind at my own pace, with my hands in my pant pockets as I watched and took in the scene before me. Nikki, the princess, being posed and fussed over by Nelli.

I couldn't figure out why Nelli had wanted to do this for Nikki, nor what she hoped to get out of it. But I loved the idea of Nikki having a Sweet Sixteen, even if it only involved the four of us.

Nikki could pretend to be annoyed all she wanted, but I could see how much she enjoyed playing this part. She posed for Elvis, giving attitude, being graceful when she stood in front of Biscayne Bay, being sweet when she stood under the gazebo, being contemplative in the private garden, being bold in front of the fountain, and being comically confused in the maze. Then I took my turn posing with her, and we climbed the mound and stood under the stone casino where I leaned against an arch and looked at her as she stood there looking lost in a daydream.

"Wow," Elvis said as he took the shots, "This is like doing an ad for those diamond ring commercials."

"You can put it in your portfolio," Nelli assured him.

I stopped leaning and went to Nikki, pulling her in to me as I tried to recreate one of those diamond ring commercials. Elvis laughed but took the picture and Nikki tried hard to not giggle, but she did anyway, and then I kissed her. Soon after, Nelli decided the photo shoot was over.

Nikki

While you could rent the gardens of Vizcaya for parties or get-togethers, the inside of the house was usually off limits for such engagements, unless of course the price was right. Diego led me inside the villa to the tea room where a birthday cake waited for me. This was beyond not normal.

We sat at a small table for four and were served tomato and fresh mozzarella sandwiches with freshly made iced tea. Again, not normal.

"I've never even been here after they've closed," I said.

"I have," Nelli said. "My mom likes to throw engagements here all the time. It's really nice when no one else is around, because then it really becomes yours."

I could believe that. I looked around the reconstructed villa and thought about what it would have been like to live in a place like that. A house, surrounded by luxuries and antiques. Each room would have a specific theme, and a specific meaning, and a specific purpose.

What would it have been like to live in a house with such a beautiful courtyard? I could envision doing my homework on my laptop while Diego

painted to his heart's desire. Of course, Elvis would always visit, and when he did he would bring us new art for a room, food, or a new board game for us to play on the piazza as we watched the sun set over Biscayne Bay.

It didn't make sense. It didn't make sense how some people got to live like this, while others struggled and worked so hard to just try and live at all. Everyone should be able to have their own Vizcaya where they could play and do what they wanted. A place where they would never have to worry about working long hours, or not seeing their kids, or hoping that the child support payments kept coming in.

"Are you ready to blow out your candles?" Nelli asked me.

I turned my attention back to my small party. She had the man waiting on us bring over the cake and then he lit the sixteen candles.

"Make a good wish," Diego said.

I felt like the rest of my life was riding on what I decided to wish for. I had to make a choice. Should I be selfish and wish for Nelli to disappear so that I could have Diego all to myself again, or should I wish for the good of all man-kind and ask for everyone to have their own personal Vizcaya? I looked at Diego, then at Elvis, then at Nelli, and then I made my wish as I blew out my candles.

Nelli

Nikki probably thought that my present to her was orchestrating the entire Vizcaya event, but that wasn't the present at all. I handed her a box wrapped in soft pink tissue paper that was held together by sisal twine. She looked unsure if she should open it, but she finally did. Inside was the custom-made frame I had commissioned for her. It was made of oak and had D + N carved at the bottom.

"For your favorite picture from the photo shoot today," I explained.

Nikki looked at the frame for a long time and then point blank asked me, "Why did you do this? All of this?"

"You deserved a real Sweet Sixteen. Or at least as real as I could make it for you."

I wasn't lying about this. It shocked me that her mother hadn't planned a larger celebration for her. Every girl deserved to walk into womanhood feeling as if she was the most important girl in the world. Diego had agreed with me when I had told him my idea.

“One day,” Nikki said as she searched my eyes for the truth, “I’m going to figure you out. And when I do, I hope it’s not as bad as I think it is.”

“I hope it’s not either,” I admitted.

She left with Diego and Elvis, and I walked by myself back to the gardens and stood in front of the fountain where I had posed for my Quince pictures. Even now I could envision Diego sitting on the steps drawing me. When I thought back to that day, I wondered if there was something I should have done differently. Then again, if anything had been different, it wouldn’t have led to where we were today. And even though I didn’t have exactly what I wanted just yet, I knew that it was just a matter of time.

I sat on the fountain and smiled as I stared at the steps.

Nikki

I hadn’t expected my mom to be home when I arrived. I walked into balloons and streamers and a big cake with my name written in pink cursive writing.

“Happy Birth....” Mom stopped her greeting as she looked me over completely. “This is new. When did you buy that dress?”

That wasn’t what she really wanted to know. What she really wanted to know was why I was wearing that dress and where I had gone in it.

“It’s a present from Nelli,” I said twirling around in it. “Isn’t it way cute?”

I never found out if she thought it was cute, but she definitely didn’t like it on me. “A present from who?”

“Nelli. I’ve told you about her. She’s come over a few times. She’s the one who invited us to her parents’ island.”

“Take that dress off, Nikki.”

Mom disappeared into the kitchen, and I hurried to my room and tried to figure out what I had done wrong. I wiped the make-up off my face, took off the tiara, changed into my shorts and tank top and put my hair up in a ponytail. Then I came back into the dining room where my mom stood absently reorganizing my presents.

“Mom, what’s wrong?”

“I’m making you your favorite frozen pizza. It should be done in a few minutes.”

“Mom...” I stood next to her and looked at her with worry and guilt, although what had me worried and what I was guilty of were still mysteries. It’s amazing how mom had that effect on me.

“If you wanted a fancy dress and a tiara, you should’ve just asked me,” she said. She still wouldn’t look at me. She adjusted the angle of the cake.

“I didn’t think I wanted that dress and a tiara. I mean, it’s no big deal.”

“It is a big deal, Nikki.” Mom turned to me and finally made eye contact. “You don’t just take expensive gifts from people. I thought I taught you better than that.”

“Well...I...” I had nothing to say to that. She had taught me better than that. It just didn’t seem like gift giving. I didn’t know why I had so readily taken everything.

“You barely even know this girl. You’re going to give her the dress, the tiara, and everything else back. Then you’re going to ask her how much that trip to the island would have cost you, and you’re going to pay her back for that, as well. Do you understand me?”

No. Where was this coming from? “Yeah, Mom. I’ll give it all back. This stuff isn’t important to me.”

“You know that’s not the point.” She left to go check up on the pizza, and I stood there stunned by this turn of events.

Mom didn’t bring up the topic again, but a lingering tension remained. I thanked her for the presents and went overboard on reassuring her that I loved these presents more than any other presents ever. She played along, knowing exactly why I laid it on thick.

When I went to my room that night, I started packing up all the things I had to return to Nelli: the dress, the shoes, the hair products, and the tiara, which was the hardest to let go of. Then there was the oak frame with D + N written at the bottom. I bit my lip as I put it on top of the beautiful dress and tried very hard to not cry as I covered it with the garment bag.

15: SUMMERTIME

Nelli

I loved the summer. I usually spent the summer traveling with Mami or going with Papi and Trace to New York while they did business and I shopped. This summer, however, I wasn't going to go anywhere. I had convinced Mami to let me stay in town to work on my dancing and acting training. This hadn't been very difficult to do since nothing made Mami happier than seeing me want to do exactly what she wanted me to do in the first place.

I had been going to the same dance studio since I was three years old. I had moved effortlessly up through their hierarchy, dancing my way out of the children's classes and skillfully into the specific genres and styles. Ballet had been my mom's favorite for me, but after my first Pointe class, I had thrown a tantrum the size of the entire studio. Mami resigned and let me stick to lyrical and jazz. We compromised on hip-hop after I promised her I'd learn tap. I fell in love with both.

Today I had started with jazz, then I had my lyrical class, and then I got to finish with hip hop. By the time I was done, water and air were my closest friends, and I spent more time stretching out than I normally did. I had been dancing the entire year, but not as much as usual. Taking three classes a day again was showing every weakness that I had allowed to develop by not keeping up my conditioning.

“Not the same as being on the dance team at school is it?” My teacher, Ms. Rosa, asked me as she knelt down. I loved Ms. Rosa and she had guided me through some of my biggest dancing obstacles in the last few years.

“I told Mami that I didn’t want to be a professional dancer,” I confessed out of nowhere to the lady.

“You want me to talk to her for you?” Nobody at this dance company wanted to teach anyone who didn’t want to be there by choice. This was their life, and they couldn’t waste that on people who weren’t committed.

“No,” I said quickly. “I’ll be fine. I just need to get my head back in it.” I stood up and shook off the fatigue that had already set into my muscles.

“Nelli,” Ms. Rosa said with the concern that a grandmother would use on their grandchild. It seemed odd coming from the youthful lady. “You need to do what it is that you want to do.”

“Isn’t it funny how we’re told from birth to always do what our parents tell us to do? When does that change?”

“When you’re no longer a child,” Ms. Rosa said. “And that comes at a different age for everyone.”

“I’m fifteen,” I said in resignation, “I don’t think my parents would think I’m there yet.” I grabbed my bags and told her I’d see her tomorrow, and then I went to Diego’s studio.

Diego

The studio had no air conditioning, so I relied on fans and the open windows to keep it as cool as possible. Now that it was summer, the afternoon rains passed through bringing a new level of humidity into my already volatile working space. I got used to the drops of sweat that formed on my neck and ran down my back as I worked on the intricate details of my latest painting. Once I was completely enthralled in what I was doing, I no longer noticed how my hair had dampened, or how my temperature had risen to correlate with the temperature outside. Whenever I was broken out of my concentration, however, it all assaulted me at once.

I opened the door to let Nelli in. She wore a leotard, with shorts over it, and a tank top with a hoodie. She said hello and dropped her duffel bag on the futon then looked at my painting before turning to look at me and suggesting that we hit the beach.

“I’m in the middle of this one,” I told her.

“It’s not going anywhere, and it’s too hot in here for you to be doing this. Come on. We can invite Nikki.”

“She’s working,” I reminded her, but I had a feeling she just wanted the confirmation. I wasn’t happy about Nikki getting a summer job, but in a way, I was really proud of her. It just didn’t allow for a lot of time for us together.

“Oh, well either way, come on. I bet you haven’t even eaten today.” She was right. I hadn’t.

“Just for a couple of hours okay?”

“Sure,” she said with an excited bounce in her step. “Let me change into my bikini real quick.”

She disappeared into the bathroom and I went over to the boxes of clothes that I kept and pulled out my swim trunks. I changed into them and threw on a T-shirt. She came out wearing a floral and flirty summer dress over her bikini.

“We’ll just go to the nearest beach,” I told her. “There’s a McDonald’s across from it we can get food at.”

“Sounds good,” she said still excited.

We left the studio and took the Metro to the fast food restaurant. After we finished eating, we walked across the street to the beach where Nelli laid out a blanket and anchored it down with her duffel bag and the bag of apple pies she had bought for us to snack on later.

Tourists and locals alike filled the beach, taking advantage of the white sand and “post card” perfect blue water to relax and de-stress. Nelli kicked off her flip flops and pulled off her dress then handed me the suntan lotion. “Can you do my back?”

I took the lotion and spread my legs so she could sit between them. I applied the lotion as I moved my hands around her back, over her shoulders, and under the string of her purple bikini. I then handed her the lotion so she could take care of the rest of her body. When she finished, I took my shirt off and switched positions with her as we repeated the steps.

“Race you to the water,” she said after we were done, and she tossed the lotion on the blanket and took off running. I got up fast and ran, hitting the water only moments after her. She laughed as she tried to walk against the waves and get further from me, but I had more strength and caught up to her in no time.

Wading in the warm water, I could smell the humidity coming from the sky and getting ready soon for another round of showers. The tourists

weren't suspecting it, thinking that the spotless blue skies were a sign, but I knew the eyes could never be trusted when it came to predicting the rain.

"How do you stay in shape?" Nelli asked me. "I only ever see you drawing or painting. I never see you do anything active."

"I play basketball with my cousin," I told her.

"Oh. A lot?"

"Like three or four times a week. Sometimes I skip school to play at his house and hang out with him."

"Really? That's pretty cool. I want to see you play basketball. Are you good?"

"I'm better than he is," I told her with a cocky smirk and she laughed and pushed herself in the water backwards a little so she went a little deeper. Then her eyes widened and she started flailing her arms and screaming which freaked me completely out. I wasn't sure what had happened and my first thought was that she had been stung by a jelly fish or something. I rushed to her side and grabbed her arm then found her legs locked around my waist with a devilish smile.

"That wasn't funny," I chided, but this just made her laugh. "Nelli, I'm serious. I thought you had been stung by a jelly fish or something." She responded by wrapping her arms around my neck as well, and I had no choice but to stand in the water and hold her.

"I just wanted to see what your reaction time was in case of an emergency."

"Can we not make these safety drills a habit?" I tried to push her off me but she tightened her legs and arms.

"Can you relax for once?"

"I was relaxed until you started messing with me."

She unlocked herself from me and pushed away, treading water as she looked at me, "Okay, Diego. We can play this your way."

She swam back to shore leaving me out in the ocean by myself. The air became heavier and I felt a cool current slide by in the water. I knew it was time to head back to the studio.

Nikki

I smelled like bagels. Smelling like bagels was so not cute. Especially since smelling like bagels didn't bare any resemblance to an actual bagel smell. Suddenly I understood the complexities of the perfume industry.

"You look hot in your uniform," Elvis said as he met me outside the bagel shop. What was he doing here?

"What are you doing here?"

"I was hoping you could get me a free coffee."

"I could've if you had come inside before my shift was over."

"Well I wasn't sure so I thought I'd scope things out first."

Elvis never disappointed in the strange and you-make-no-gosh-darn-sense department. I took off my brown apron and folded it as I walked to the bus stop. "So do you want to come with me to visit Diego?"

"I probably shouldn't," he said. "Are you going now?"

"Smelling like bagel? Are you nuts? I have to go home and change."

Elvis sniffed me. "Is that what it is? It smells like...well I guess bagel."

"Thanks, no really." I pulled out my cell phone and called Diego, but he didn't pick up so I sent him a text saying that I'd probably be there in a couple of hours. The bus arrived on time. Elvis and I sat together toward the back of the bus.

"I think it sucks that your mom made you get a job," Elvis offered.

"She didn't make me. This was my decision."

"It was a bad decision."

I looked at him and motioned for him to just spit out whatever point he was trying to make. "How is this a bad decision? I'm sixteen, I want a car, I need to start saving up for college. There are a million reasons this is the best decision ever."

"And one reason it's a really bad one."

Oh. I knew what this was about. "What are you talking about?"

"That's eight hours a day, not including the amount of time it takes you to get to work and back, that Nelli gets Diego all to herself."

If I had been driving the bus, it would have screeched to a halt right at this moment.

"Nelli has dance class." I pointed out.

"For three hours a day not including the amount of time it takes her to get to her classes and back."

"And acting lessons."

“Which are private and only on Saturdays.”

“Wait,” I said practically turning completely in my bus seat to look at him. “Are you telling me that I have a reason to be worried? Because I think I know my boyfriend really well and I’m pretty sure that I have nothing to worry about so why are you worrying about it?”

“I’m not worrying about anything. I’m just pointing out the obvious.”

“You’re trying to cause problems.”

Elvis started to say something then shut his mouth and took out his planner. “Okay, how about I make a bet with you?”

“I am not a betting woman.”

“You should start, and here’s your first bet. How long do you think it will be before Diego comes and visits you at your job?”

“Why would he visit?”

“Because he’s your boyfriend, and he should because it’s really the only chance he’s going to get to see you this summer. So how long do you think before he does it? And you can’t tell him to do it. He has to just think of it on his own.”

“He gets caught up in his work, he’ll never think...” Elvis shot me a look that shut me up.

“Stop making excuses for him. You always do that.”

When had Elvis gotten so serious? “Fine, he’ll probably visit Friday.”

Elvis accepted this prediction and noted it in his planner. “Okay, twenty bucks says that he won’t visit Friday.”

“Wait, shouldn’t you pick another day for him to visit? Isn’t that how bets work?”

“You don’t want me to place that kind of bet.”

“Why not?”

“Just trust me. So are we straight?” He asked extending his hand.

I shook it because of course Diego would come and visit me by then. It made perfect sense when I thought about it. He’d probably want to surprise me, and I’d sneak him some coffee and bagels to take back to his studio so he could keep working on his latest creation. Elvis was such an instigator. I had nothing at all to worry about.

Nothing at all.

16: A RAINY DAY

Nelli

Fridays were my hardest day. It started with lyrical, moved into tap, and ended with my techniques class that Ms. Rosa personally supervised me in. It was an honor to be chosen for a private techniques class and it showed that the teacher had personally invested themselves into your dancing. I had been surprised on Tuesday that she had chosen me after what I had confessed to her. She had been pushing me harder than necessary, but I had too much pride to say something about it. So I did what she asked, and I did it over and over until it was perfect. When class was done, she didn't compliment me. In fact, she didn't say anything at all.

I grabbed my bag and drank my water as I stepped outside into what was about to be a deluge of water. I started to reach into my bag for my umbrella when I spotted my mother's car waiting outside of the dance studio. Disappointed, I got in and quickly put my seatbelt on.

"You didn't have to pick me up," I told her.

"It was about to pour. I figured you'd be happy."

"Yeah, I just ... yeah."

She pulled out into traffic and the rain came tumbling down, hitting the car with repetitive force. "How was class?"

"It was good," I rummaged through my duffel bag and pulled out my cell phone, texting Diego to let him know that I wasn't coming right over.

“Well I got you an audition for Monday and they’re going to need to see you dance so maybe you can go over a routine with Michael tomorrow.”

“An audition for what?”

“A gum commercial. Isn’t that fun?”

“Yeah, a lot of fun,” I said looking at my phone and hoping for a text back.

“I already told Michael that he needs to go over commercial auditions with you again tomorrow. It won’t hurt to brush up. I made a hair appointment for Sunday so she’ll come over and get your hair to look just perfect for it. There’s no reason you shouldn’t book this one.”

“I’ll do my best.” Diego texted back a simple “ok.”

“And don’t forget that you need to be measured for the charity fashion show I’m organizing next month. I already told Delia that you get at least five outfits to wear. There’s no reason you shouldn’t be walking as much as the other models. We need to find you a new modeling agent. The one you have now isn’t doing anything for you. I should have fired him a long time ago.”

I stayed quiet and let my mom continue rambling. It wasn’t hard to ignore her voice since the rain drowned her out anyway.

I sent Diego another text telling him that I was undergoing torture in my mom’s car, and then my mom said, “Are you going to ask John?”

“Huh?” I asked her.

“To the fashion show. You really should bring a date for the dinner, and John always makes you look good. Of course your father would prefer if you didn’t have a date, but he doesn’t understand that you need to start being seen with boys by your side. You wouldn’t want people to start getting the impression that you can’t lure them in.”

“Can I invite someone else? Someone who’s not John?”

This caught her attention. “Who else would you ask? Not Ezra. Did he break up with Danielle? You know if he broke up with Danielle that could be a good opportunity for you. His family has a lot of clout.”

“No, not Ezra.”

“Oh good. Because he’s not nearly as good looking as John.”

“Someone else, Mami. You don’t really know him.”

“I know all of your friends.”

“He’s a new friend.”

“A new friend? From where? From school?”

“Um, he’s new.” I was a very good liar, but that lie would be too easy for her to investigate and figure out so it was best to try and evade the specifics. “Just let me ask him. If he says yes, then you’ll meet him.”

“Don’t you think your papi and I should meet him before you start bringing a perfect stranger to our events? Who is this person? What’s his name? Where does he come from? What does his family do?”

I almost told her that the maid met him, and that maybe if she was home instead of shopping or partying, she would have met him by now as well. But I held my tongue and tried to find the best answer for all of this.

“I guess. Um, he’s just a new friend, so I don’t know much about him yet. If I invite him to the dinner then we can all get to know him better and you guys can grill him all you want.”

“Does he have a name at least?”

“Diego.”

“Diego? Is he Cuban?”

“I don’t know, Mami. You can ask him that too, okay? Just let me bring him. I really don’t want to ask John.”

“Fine. Bring him. But he better know how to behave himself properly. I’m trusting you with this.”

“He won’t cause a scene. I promise.”

Diego texted back with advice to blast the radio really loud so I didn’t have to listen to her talk. I smiled and put my phone away.

Nikki

As it turns out, rainy days meant big business for bagels. My line was out the door, and as fate would have it, my cash register jammed several times, I ran out of ones, and the crazy-stupid-oh-my-gosh-would-it-stop-already rain made our credit card system go offline for a full hour. A full hour of having to tell people that we’re only taking cash at the moment is a full hour of stress like I’ve never had before.

The bagel shop was packed with people taking up seats but never leaving them because who in their right mind would go back out into that crazy rain? Each time the door opened, I looked over in hopes of seeing one face only, but it never was that face. It didn’t help that Elvis was in the corner hogging up a two seat table with his laptop and getting refill after refill of coffee.

“Nikki, the line,” my boss said as he walked by me in a panic. The line wasn’t getting smaller, but that wasn’t my fault at all. How could I control people wanting to stand in it? And then this guy in front of me! Was he for real? A dozen bagels mixed varieties, three containers of cream cheese, five café lattes, two chef’s salads, fourteen fruit cups, oh my God! I was about to lose it. I put in his order and turned around to assemble his motley box of bagels.

“Not poppy seed, anything but poppy seed,” he said behind my shoulder. Oh my God! Did he not say mixed varieties? I almost grabbed the poppy seed bagel and flung it at him. And to think, I had been hired for my positive countenance and perky attitude. I put plain, and sesame, and onion, and whole wheat, and blueberry, and more plain, and closed the box before he could develop a sudden aversion to plain bagels. I packed it up, grabbed the cream cheese, stuck it in the box and told him to move to the side while his salad and fruit and coffee were all being prepared. Then I took the next customer:

who wanted a plain bagel with tomato and cream cheese and who wasn’t Diego;

then the lady who wanted a salad with no lettuce and a bottled water and who obviously wasn’t Diego;

then the guy and his toddler who didn’t know what they wanted even though they had been in line for forty-five minutes and neither of them were Diego;

then the older man who couldn’t read the menu and had to point things out so that I could tell him what each thing was, and he too, was not Diego.

When my shift was finally over, Elvis packed up his laptop and walked over to me as I got myself a soda and tried to figure out where I had put my umbrella. He tapped me on the shoulder to indicate that his was big enough for the both of us, and I took it from him and walked outside. I opened it for the both of us since he still had his cup of coffee in his hand. He didn’t state he had won the bet, but I made an excuse anyway.

“It was raining. He wouldn’t have left the studio in the rain.”

“And that’s why your line was out the door,” Elvis said without much sympathy. We walked to the bus stop and Elvis was kind enough to change the topic to the much more mundane topic of the new demo he was recording. I half-listened and half-didn’t and kept my emotions in check the whole way home.

Diego

The rain had me thinking of water, and it had me thinking of the island, and it had me thinking of Nelli in the rain, or in the water, or on the island. I was drawing an underwater scene with a jelly fish and a small, gray, flat shark, but I hadn't started drawing her just yet. The loud knock on the door broke me out of my concentration. When I opened it, a paper bag was thrown at my chest and I barely caught it before it dropped to the floor.

"Hey," I said to Nikki who looked like she had been standing out in the rain for a very long time. I moved so she could come in and she walked in and crossed her arms and didn't say anything. I closed the door, confused, and opened the bag to see a bagel and some cream cheese inside. "Um, thanks, I haven't eaten so..."

"Why didn't you come visit me?" she asked.

The relentless rain still hadn't let up and I went to the window to make sure the wind hadn't shifted and started blowing the rain into the studio. The sill was a little damp and I closed the first window. "I was caught up in my new drawing."

"You work here. I visit you here. You have never once visited me where I work. Why?"

"I didn't think about it."

"Because you don't think about me."

She was really upset. I stopped closing windows and looked at her, "I think of you all the time." It must have been the wrong thing to say because she let out a frustrated sound and went to my paintings, pointing them out.

"Nelli. Nelli. Nelli. Nelli. You only think about her. How much time have you guys been spending together while I'm at work? I bet you're not too caught up when she comes over, or if she asks you to do something. What exactly have you guys been doing so far?"

It felt like she had punched me in the stomach or maybe the chest. I couldn't figure out where the sore emotion was located because my brain was trying to formulate a response to her accusations. "Nik, you're the one who wanted to get this job this summer. You're the one that made things like this." No, that wasn't the right thing to say.

"You're blaming me for you thinking about Nelli all the time?"

"I didn't mean it like that."

"YOU are blaming ME for your stupid..." she looked around and pointed to one of the many pieces, "drawings of her?"

“I’m not blaming you.”

“I’m trying to save up money for a car, for college, for my future. Why aren’t you? Do you honestly think that your mom is going to keep paying for all of this, Diego? In two years, you’ll be eighteen. You’ll be ready to graduate and then what? Then what?”

All I could do was look at her spaz out on me. With her wet, stringy hair and soaked shirt and blotched make-up, she looked like a ranting and raving lunatic. What was I supposed to say to her? I didn’t think about my future. I never had. I didn’t know what I wanted to do after high school, but I had two years to figure that out. Not everyone could be as intense as her.

“Say something!” she demanded of me.

I wanted her to calm down and sit down, and relax, and stop worrying so much. I wanted her to realize that we were still sixteen, and she still had time, and she didn’t need a summer job, and that if she kept pushing this idea of a future that she would completely miss out on the present.

“We’re done,” she finally said. “She can have you and you can have her. I’m not doing this anymore. It’s just not fair.”

My heart sank. My gut feeling was to grab her and tell her that she was acting crazy, but instead she walked out and slammed the door, and all I could hear was the rain pound against the window pane. I had started this relationship when I kissed her at the bonfire years ago. I had ended it when I didn’t bother to show up and order a bagel.

17: I SCREWED UP

Nikki

I screwed up. I spent the entire weekend sobbing, crying, and yelling about how I had screwed up. Mom came in several times with everything from ice cream to cookie dough to fudge brownies to chicken nuggets, but I was still a wreck. I kept hoping that Diego would show up and fight for our relationship. The fact that he didn't, and that I was expecting it, just made me cry more.

"First break ups are always hard," Mom said as if that was supposed to make it better. As if I was supposed to expect that every break up after this would be easy, or worse that there were more break ups to come.

"I did everything," I sobbed, and sobbing is not cute at all, but I couldn't stop it from happening. "I made sure he came to school, I supported his art, I took art for him so we could be in class together, and I even gave it up to him so we could be each other's first." I probably should've kept that one to myself, but the sobbing scared my mom too much to react however she normally would have to that confession. "I really, really love him."

"I know," she said as she pushed my hair strands behind my ear to keep them out of the path of my heavy tears.

"I still do. I worry about him. I worry about him more than he worries about himself."

"He knows that. And if he doesn't know that, then he'll figure it out now. You did the right thing. You need to think about you and put yourself first."

“No.” I shook my head because my mom was so so so so SO wrong. “No, I gave him to her. I gave up. I gave them what they wanted, and now I have nothing. I screwed up so bad!” More sobs.

“You didn’t screw up. You did what was right.”

“This isn’t right,” I fought back. “This whole thing isn’t right. The only reason you’re saying this is because you knew it was going to happen. You knew that I couldn’t keep a guy just how you couldn’t keep Daddy!”

My mom recoiled at the verbal attack, but she held strong. “I’m only letting you say these things and get away with them because I know you’re going through a hard time right now. But you need to realize that you’re the strong one here. Not him. You’re the one that’s going to come out on top. It’s his loss. Not yours.”

She left me alone in my room, and I didn’t blame her. I didn’t want to be around me right now either.

Nelli

I screwed up. I didn’t think I had ever bombed an audition as badly as I had bombed this one.

“You’re perfect,” the casting director said. I was pretty sure I had heard him incorrectly. He stood up from the table and clasped his hands together bringing them to his chin as he stared me down and walked around me. “Youthful, pretty, the camera loves you. Perfect. What do you think?” he asked the lady next to him.

“Young, pretty and ethnic. It’s exactly what we’re looking for,” she agreed with him as she made some notes on my headshot.

“You’re perfect,” he said to me again. “We shoot on Wednesday. Don’t be late.”

The lady handed me all kinds of papers and sent me on my way. When I came out of the audition room, Mami screamed and hugged me tightly, giving me a kiss on each cheek. The other girls in the room looked at me with frightened looks, and then their suspicions were confirmed when the director stuck his head out and told everyone they could go home.

“It’s only because you look Hispanic,” a blonde girl said as she stood up and grabbed her things quickly. She tossed her hair and glared at me once more before walking out. I thought this was a bit extreme for a gum commercial.

“Congratulations,” another girl said, and I thanked her with an appreciative smile.

“Let’s go shopping,” Mami said. She practically pulled me to the car, talking a mile a minute about what I should wear for the commercial and how I had to make sure that the attention was put on me more than the stupid gum I was supposed to be selling. I looked over the script and director’s notes and read it to my mom so she could get an idea for what kind of commercial this was.

The unoriginal premise involved kids in a classroom waiting for the bell to ring so that they could run and dance out of the school just so they could finally chew gum. I was one of the girls that had to dance out of the school. It wasn’t a speaking part, and I doubted that I would get anymore face time than whoever else they had casted, but Mami seemed encouraged.

“Just make sure to get in the scenes more than the other kids. Be nice to the crew if you have to. They’ll make sure to keep the camera on you.”

“I’ll do what I can.” I took out my cell phone and texted Diego to let him know I got the part. He had been avoiding my calls and text messages for two days and I was starting to get really worried. When I had gone down to his studio, he hadn’t been there. I had even tried going to his home, but no one answered the door. As a last resort, I had called Nikki to ask if they wanted to hang out, but she hadn’t picked up either. Something was going on, and I needed to know what it was.

Once we were shopping, and Mami was occupied by the sales lady showing her a designer dress that had just come in, I stepped outside of the boutique to call Elvis. I had never called him before.

“Hello?”

“Hey, Elvis, it’s Nelli.” Silence. I don’t know why he always fell silent around me.

“Uh, hi, Nelli.”

“I’ve been trying to get in touch with Diego and Nikki this entire weekend but neither of them are picking up. Is everything alright?”

“Not really,” Elvis said and then he seemed to debate whether or not he should say more.

“Oh no, what happened?”

“They broke up.”

Now it was my turn to go silent. I wondered if Elvis could sense through the phone just how much my face had lit up, “Oh. Wow. Poor...them.”

“Yeah. I’ve gotta go.”

“Yeah, sure. Call me if you need anything.”

Elvis hung up and I stared at my phone incredulously. This summer was the best summer ever.

Diego

I screwed up. I should have run after her, or banged on her door at home and told her that I had screwed up. It was my fault. Nikki always did the right thing. Here she was spending her summer doing the right thing and what I had done? I had accused her of being selfish when maybe it was me that had been selfish. Or something. I don't know. None of this made a lot of sense.

“Do you plan on making any baskets today?” My cousin, Billy, asked me this as I had thrown up another shot and missed. I didn't answer him and stole the ball from him, throwing it back up and missing again. I cursed and put my hands on the back of my head as I walked away from the basket.

“Okay, I can't have you on my court playing like this,” Billy said putting the ball down and sitting on it as he looked at me. “Talk to me.”

“What's to talk about?” I asked. “Nikki broke up with me. That's it.”

“You're obviously not happy about this.”

The concept of Billy giving me relationship advice was funny. Mostly because I didn't think he'd ever even been in a relationship. But just like everyone else around me who knew about my family, the lack of a father figure seemed to inspire the males around me to try and fill the part. This is probably why I told Billy that I wasn't really in the mood to talk about this, and that he should save himself the pain of watching me miss more baskets by just going inside and letting me have some alone time with the court.

“Do what you need to do,” Billy said. He passed the ball to me and left me alone.

I didn't make a single shot, and when I realized that none of my lay-ups were going in either, I called it a night and took the bus home. The house was empty, of course, and lacking life or any signs that there had ever been life there to begin with. I took a flashlight and went out to the backyard. I found the spot where my hide-out used to be set up, and sat on the cool and damp grass.

The only person that I wanted to talk to right at that moment was my mom, but I knew better than to waste my time trying to call her. I tried to

think of what advice she would give me at this moment. Before Chris she would have said something encouraging, something that would help me solve this problem, but now, she probably wouldn't say anything useful. That didn't curb my desire or need to talk to her right now, however.

"It's a hot night isn't it?" Mr. Alvarez said scaring the crap out of me. I looked over to the other side of the fence where the man was standing with a glass in his hand.

"Yeah, I just, yeah." I had no explanation for why I was sitting out in the backyard, in the middle of the night, with only a flashlight.

"Why don't you come over? We have plenty of chicken leftover and the Marlins game is still on."

It was weird. But at that moment, the only thought that came into my head was me wondering if my dad liked baseball. That's when I knew I had officially lost my mind.

"I should get inside," I said getting up from the ground.

"Okay. How about I come over then? I can bring you the chicken. You can decide if you want to invite me in or not, but either way you'll have food."

"I'm not that hungry."

"Just the same. I'll be over with it in a few minutes." I watched Mr. Alvarez go back inside his house and then I went back inside mine. I turned on the light and tossed the flashlight onto the couch. It was so quiet that I could hear the clock tick and the old furniture creak and settle into place. I hadn't realized just how noisy my studio was, or how accustomed I had already become to it.

The doorbell rang and I went over to open it for Mr. Alvarez. "*Pollo asado*," he said handing me the plate wrapped in aluminum foil. Then he waited a moment before adding, "So are you going to invite me in?"

It turned out that I didn't even hesitate. "Yeah, come on in."

I led him to the kitchen where I put the food in the fridge and offered him some water. He accepted it and then I leaned against the kitchen counter and crossed my arms, not sure of what to say or do next.

"When I was your age," he began, "I used to have a tree that I would climb up and sit in when I needed to think. No one ever found me. People don't have a tendency to look up."

"I guess they don't," I said feeling less comfortable with my decision to let him in. "You know, I don't really need a dad so..." Either he didn't get the

hint or he purposely waited for me to finish that statement in order to make me feel stupid. "I'm just saying. We don't have to talk about things."

"That's good. I don't like talking." He drank more water. "I do, however, like imparting my wisdom on others. How about you let this *viejo* do that for you?"

I smiled when he referred to himself as an old man, and I wondered what I would be like at that age. It seemed impossible that I would ever be that old. I scratched my head and moved my hand through my limp, brown hair before finally saying something to him.

"My girlfriend broke up with me."

"Oh oh," he said, "Girl trouble. I know all about it. The blonde right?"

"Yeah, Nikki," I confirmed. It was funny that he had assumed it was her, or that he had even noticed that a blonde came to the house from time to time. I don't think my own mother was aware that Nikki came over sometimes, nor that our relationship had ever moved from friends to more.

"And why did she break up with you?"

It was such a complicated answer that I didn't know how to word it. I tried to explain it the best that I could: about how we met Nelli at Vizcaya, and how I suddenly got so inspired by her, and how in the end Nikki just didn't want to bother anymore. "That's why I didn't run after her, I guess. I think she wanted to break up with me."

"The only time a girl wants to break up with a boy they care about is when they're afraid they're going to get dumped first," Mr. Alvarez observed. "It seems to me she had a good reason to think that."

"I had thought about breaking up with her," I admitted.

"And why didn't you?"

"Our relationship moved to a new level, and we got caught up, and we were spending a lot more time together." I didn't think it would be appropriate to mention sex to Mr. Alvarez, but he was smart enough to figure it out anyway.

"I see. Well a new level does always make relationships more complicated. As do new people. The way you feel about Nelli. Have you ever felt that way about Nikki?"

"It's different." In my head I thought back to the yacht and their matching bikinis. "Same but different. They're so alike in so many ways, but Nikki never inspired me the way Nelli did. When I saw Nelli, I just wanted to create a million paintings of her. She didn't seem real."

"And then you chose the fantasy over the reality."

I guess I had. “Nikki’s my best friend. I don’t want to lose her. Not like this.”

“I’m sorry to tell you this,” Mr. Alvarez said putting down the now empty glass of water, “but once you take your friendship to the next level, there’s no going back to the previous level. Let me tell you something about women. When they commit to something, they put their heart and soul into it. You broke her heart and her soul. Neither of those things ever heals completely, nor quickly. She was your best friend. Was.”

I was never going to invite Mr. Alvarez into the house again. “There has to be a way to fix this.”

“Fix what? What is it exactly that you want? You had a choice to make. Nikki or Nelli. When you didn’t go after Nikki, you chose Nelli. You want Nikki to be okay with that? You don’t get to decide that for her. You have to wait until she’s ready to be your friend again, but like I said, it won’t be like how it used to be.”

I started to feel physically ill as the reality of his words set in. “Tell me you’ve gone through this. Tell me that everything turns out okay in the end.”

Something came over Mr. Alvarez’s eyes. It was as if he looked at me and saw something that wasn’t there before. He seemed to suddenly have concerned features and I wondered what he suddenly thought of me. Maybe he suddenly realized that I was the reason my mom didn’t want to come home at night.

“Everything turns out okay in the end,” he finally said. “But it doesn’t happen easily or simply. You have to never give up, and always work hard for whatever it is you want most. Whatever it may be.”

I thanked him for his answer and offered him more water, but he said that he should probably get going back to the house before his wife started to worry. I then made the mistake of asking Mr. Alvarez if his wife was his best friend.

He didn’t respond right away, and it wasn’t until he had stepped out the front door that he turned to me and said, “Never waste questions when you already know the answer.” He waved and told me that the door was always open for me to come in, and then I thanked him again and closed the door.

The house was quiet again, and I turned off the light and sat on the couch. I listened to the clock tick.

Nikki

“I screwed up,” Elvis said as he stood at my front door in the middle of the night.

“You woke me up for this?” I asked him. “And your mom is going to kill you for sneaking out of the house.”

“Nikki,” Elvis said. He looked as if he was in serious trouble.

“What exactly did you do?”

“I told Nelli that you and Diego had broken up. She knows. Now she knows. I didn’t mean to tell her. It just tumbled out.”

“It’s okay,” I said. I closed the door behind me so that we were both outside.

“Your face is puffy.”

“Thanks, Elvis.” My face really did feel like it was made up of marshmallows. I had to get it together before I went to work tomorrow. One look at me looking anti-positive and anti-perky was going to get me out of a job.

“You were always too good for him you know?” he said. Elvis was the sweetest guy ever. Too sweet.

“Thanks, Elvis,” I said again. “Hey, since you’re here, can you do me a favor?”

“Anything.”

I led him back inside the house and to my room where I had gathered all the pictures he had ever taken of me and Diego into a single box. Sure the thought had occurred to me to light them on fire and take pleasure in watching them burn, but I knew that it wouldn’t really be the cathartic experience that I needed. Burning pictures weren’t going to erase the memory, so instead I had decided to box them up and give them back to their rightful owner.

“You’ve taken some great pictures of us,” I told him. “You really should be a photographer.”

“My mom would have a heart attack if I told her that I wanted to give up the whole singing thing to be a photographer.” He took the box and looked at a picture of me and Diego goofing off in my backyard as we pretended to pose for his camera. Diego had reached behind to lift me up as I jumped on his back, and we both had struck a serious pose at that moment. I remembered us falling in laughter, but the serious picture had been captured regardless. “This was the first picture I ever took of you as a couple,” he said.

“Elvis, I want you to be honest with me,” I said as I glanced at the picture and back at him. “Do you think he really liked me? Like that. Like in that girlfriend way? Or do you think he just played along because there just wasn’t anyone else he was interested in?”

“Honestly?”

“Be very, very honest. Brutally honest.”

“In my brutally honest opinion, I don’t know. I wish I could tell you one way or the other, but from my perspective, I never could tell.”

“Wow,” I said. I felt like I had just swallowed something sharp. “That was brutally honest.”

“I’m sorry.”

“No, that was...you’re a really good friend, Elvis. A really good friend. I put your twenty in the box.”

“You don’t have to...”

“Hey, I lost fair and square. I’ll win it back, though, so don’t spend it all in one place.”

He smiled and I led him back out and wished him good night before closing the door and looking into my dark house. I leaned my head against the door and let the tears fall again, but I hoped it was the last time I would cry because of Diego.

18: UNWELCOMED INVITATIONS

Nelli

I didn't want to rush anything, or come off insensitive. I wanted Diego to know that I'd be here if and when he needed me. I was, after all, a supportive friend. Felipa came to tell me that Lindsey was downstairs. I told her to let her up even though the last person I wanted to see was Lindsey. Well maybe she wasn't the last person I wanted to see, but I didn't want to see her just the same.

"Hey, Nel," she said coming in.

"Hey," I said not bothering to look at her as I perused my issue of *Cosmo* that had come in the mail.

"So we haven't hung out all summer."

"Oh, I know," I said. I put the magazine down and began my lamentations. "Mami has me taking all of these dance classes and an acting class, and I did a gum commercial, and I have all these other auditions."

"Wow," Lindsey said as she sat on my bed without invitation. "You've been really busy."

"Yeah. How has your summer been going?"

"Good. We've all just been hanging out. We miss you."

"You mean John misses me."

"No," Lindsey said. "We miss you. It's not the same going to the beach or to the park or to the mall without you. Danielle is unbearable and the two of you used to cancel each other out. I'm so close to telling her to take a hike

and I really don't want to do that. I don't want to lose two friends in one year."

I really didn't understand where this was coming from. What Lindsey needed was to strike out on her own. Danielle was definitely just going to keep her down.

"Maybe it's time you found new friends, Linds," I told her. I opened my magazine back up and started reading an interesting article about how to lure in the man of your dreams.

"Okay, I'm sorry," Lindsey said. She got up and placed her hands in the air as if that was supposed to help her think. "Did I do something to you? Is there a reason you're being like this to me? Because the last I remember, you stole the boy that I wanted so if anyone should be upset here, it's me."

"And then you wonder why I question your motivations to want to remain my friend," I said, glad we had finally gotten to the heart of the matter.

"Because, as a friend, I wasn't going to let something like a boy get between us. Excuse me for not realizing then that you did it so that I would stop being friends with you. God, Nelli, I knew you weren't a saint, but this is just...you're just a mean person."

"Sorry to disappoint you." I flipped the page.

"Have a nice life," Lindsey said. She slammed the door as she left my room. I tossed the magazine onto my bed and reached over to my nightstand to grab my phone. I quickly dialed a number that I had known by heart since I was in elementary school.

"Hey, Danielle. It's Nelli."

Nikki

I placed the bag on the kitchen counter and started pulling out the goodies. "We have plain, and cheese, oh and salt. And I stole three Danishes and a blueberry muffin."

"I love when you take care of dinner," Mom said as she got the plates. "How was work today?"

"The same. This obnoxious lady wanted her bagel and soda comp'd because she couldn't finish eating it."

"Was something wrong with it?"

“No. She just said it was too much. Seriously, what is wrong with people?” I asked rhetorically as I tore into one of the Danishes. We may have been a bagel place, but somehow we had mastered the art of the Danish as well.

“People like to get free stuff all the time. You should see how many people at the hospital think that they shouldn’t be billed because it wasn’t their fault that they ended up there.” Mom led the way to the living room. I settled in on the couch, snuggling in comfortably with one of the pillows on my lap, as I continued to enjoy my food. “So I spoke with your father on the phone yesterday.”

“I’m sorry,” I sympathized. “What did he want?”

“I was the one who called him.”

The sound of brakes screeching to a halt was heard in my head, and then I started to panic. “Oh my God, did he stop paying child support? I’m not eighteen yet!”

“That’s not why I called him. He’s still paying the child support on time. I called him because I thought that maybe you’d like to visit him for a couple of weeks. Get out of this city for a little bit.”

“Why would I want to do that?” I knew why. “I have a job. I can’t just leave.”

“Well either way, he said he would be fine with it if you decided you wanted to.”

The last time I had visited my dad, I had just finished my last year in elementary school. I had spent those few weeks in an awkward state of boredom while he tried to be cool and show me how neat it was to take apart and put back together the engine of a car.

“I’m fine here, Mom. Plus I like the income.”

“I want you to have fun this summer. Not just work. You’re sixteen. You should be enjoying your time out of school.”

“I’m enjoying it. Trust me. Elvis and I made plans to go bowling tomorrow. And then I’m going to go with him this weekend to the recording studio where he’s doing his demo.”

“Okay,” Mom said. The subject was dropped. I hated that my mom had felt the need to call my dad. I knew she hated talking to him more than she had to, and I felt awful that I had given her a reason to do so. I finished my Danish and moved the pillow to my mom’s lap where I laid my head and watched TV with her. Before I knew it, I had fallen completely asleep.

Diego

I had a lot of missed text messages and voicemails from Nelli, and I finally decided to call her back. She told me she'd come talk to me at the studio. I waited for her as I sat on the futon and stared at the painting of her and the jelly fish and the shark. It was almost done, but it needed the details that I needed to see in person. I had thought of scrapping it altogether, but there was a part of me that needed to see it through.

She arrived dressed in a blue and gray striped summer dress, and she had sunglasses on her head even though it was night outside.

"I'm sorry about you and Nikki," she said. It sounded sincere enough, but I knew better.

"Me too," I said. I took her in, committing to memory the distance between her eyes, the tip of her nose to the top of her lip, and the exact shape of her chin. She sat beside me and placed her hand on my arm. It was supposed to be comforting, but she leaned in closer and kissed me. I felt guilty, but I found myself kissing her back anyway. I pulled her closer to me, finally giving her the kiss that she had wanted at the beach. I tried really hard to push the image of Nikki's disappointed face from my mind. Then Nelli pushed away from me.

"I'm nobody's rebound."

I just looked at her and thought about how she was the one that had initiated this, and how she was the one that was here right now, right at this moment, in my studio. I didn't respond to her and I felt a sinking feeling in my stomach that this was the moment where I had to stop it. This was the moment where I could tell her I wasn't interested, and then I could focus on saving my friendship with Nikki. This was *that* moment.

"I have a thing," she said after my silence continued. She focused her brown eyes back on me. "This charity thing. I want you to be my date."

"I'm not looking for a rebound."

"Cute," she said taking her cell phone out. "I already told my parents that I'm bringing you and they're looking forward to meeting you. You have to wear a suit so I'll set up a fitting..."

"I own a suit."

"It won't do," she said. I wondered what exactly she was getting me into, and I wondered why I was letting myself get into it. "I'm texting you all the information you need." She pressed send then sighed as if she had just finished fifteen tasks at once.

VIZCAYA

“You didn’t even really ask me if I wanted to go.”

She stepped forward and her hand found the back of my neck as she leaned up to give me the kiss back that I had been expecting in the first place. She then pulled away and said, “Welcome to my world.” She disappeared from my studio before I could process what any of this had really meant. I stood up and went back to the painting, suddenly able to add the details of Nelli’s face to it. I wondered why I was shaking a little, and why I felt so out of control, and why I hadn’t stopped this when I had the chance to.

19: CHARITY

Nelli

The day of the charity show, I was up at five in the morning getting my hair done and drinking a big cup of coffee. The event was taking place at the Biltmore, a luxurious hotel that rivaled Vizcaya in its elegance, beauty, and history. The hotel was grander than the villa of course, and the fashion show was taking place in the main ballroom of the very large Biltmore conference center. The charity show was expected to bring the who's who of Miami's fashion and entertainment industry, and very large donations had been made for tables for the dinner after the show. This wasn't the first time I had attended or participated in such an extravagant event.

Never mind that the event did not begin until four p.m., at five a.m. I was expected to already be looking my best. I helped Mami as she kept watch over the people who had been hired to set everything up. I knew that the real reason she expected me to be there so early was so that Delia would see that I was already prepared and ready for the fashion show. Mami and Delia only got along when they weren't working on an event together, and I knew that today would bring out the fireworks for sure.

I sat at a table that had already been set up in the corner and began making the calls that Mami couldn't get to at the moment. I called the caterer for her, the florist, the interior decorator, all confirming that they were running on time. I took messages for Mami, or handed her the phone when

it was an emergency. Delia strolled in at eight in the morning already barking at the poor workmen who had been put in charge of building the runway.

“Nelli, beautiful as always,” she said when she saw me. Delia was only slightly older than Mami, but she had worked her way up into one of the most prominent fashion industry positions in town. A very petite size zero of a lady, she ran a fashion magazine that spotlighted what was in, ripped apart what was going out, and kept everyone abreast on the fashion industry gossip as it pertained to South Beach. “And look at you already busy busy busy. Just like your mother.” She looked me over again. “Just beautiful.”

“Thanks, Delia. I really like your scarf.”

“Harry designed it.” She namedropped every designer in town every chance she got. “And where is our Harry? Where are the designers?” She was off barking again and I was back to placing and answering calls.

At ten it was time for our rehearsal. The designers bickered with each other over the order in which their clothes would be shown and which models would be best for their designs. Delia lined me up with the other girls that had been chosen for the event, and I instantly felt short and fat. Mami should’ve just tattooed “nepotism” onto my forehead.

“Such a pretty face,” one of the designers said when he stopped in front of me, “But you are so curvy.”

“Nelli will be in no less than five garments,” Delia informed them.

“But will the garments fit?” the designer asked Delia. “I certainly don’t have time to be adjusting the clothes to make them bigger.”

“You’ll figure it out.” Only that he didn’t, because he refused to have his clothes on anyone that wasn’t a twig. Luckily, after massive persuasion on Delia’s part, the other designers settled for including me. I went to the backstage prep area to try on the first dress that I would be wearing.

By twelve it was time for our lunch break, but after having been called curvy and too big for a design, I settled for a cup of coffee. If I ate anything now, the designers would notice it immediately once I put on all the garments I had just been fitted for. I had the biggest headache in the world.

“How was the fitting?” Mami asked as she came up to me. She grabbed a cup of coffee from the tray.

“It was okay. Do you have any aspirin?”

“Check my purse.” She gave me a quick kiss on the cheek and then continued ordering people around. I walked over to the makeshift control center and reached under the table to grab her purse. I opened it and found a bottle of aspirin, quickly taking three since I was sure two wouldn’t be

enough. I then grabbed my purse and pulled out my cell phone and called Diego to see if he was getting ready yet.

Nikki

This is the best idea I had ever come up with. No really. I got major points for coming up with this one. Elvis and I had wanted to go to the pool, but neither of us had pools in our backyards. So we went to our local toy store and got two kiddie pools and voila! Problem solved.

I lay back in my kiddie pool with my head cradled on the side and my long legs sticking out over the other side. I worked on the crossword puzzle of the day. Elvis was in his pool working on his Sudoku book that he had picked up at the toy store as well. In between us, we had soda slushies and a bowl of popcorn, and so far the sun was still shining and the rain hadn't made an appearance.

"Okay, you would know this," I said to Elvis. "Greta Garbo portrayal?"

"It's probably Camille," he said.

"How do they expect people to know that?" Seriously? Greta Garbo? Not everyone's mom was a black and white movie junkie like Elvis' mom was. If it wasn't for Elvis that name probably wouldn't even ring a bell.

The crossword puzzle was supposed to get my mind off the little things that had been bothering me. Like how at odd moments of the day I'd wonder what Diego was doing. One time while Elvis and I were playing Monopoly, we realized that it just wasn't the same with only two people. We haven't played Monopoly since.

"What do you think they mean by pillowcase material?" I said looking at the blank boxes.

"Like cotton?"

"That would fit." I wrote it in anyway even though I was willing to bet the answer wasn't that easy. I wondered what Diego would have said if I had suggested the kiddie pools. He probably would have liked the idea just so that he could sit on the grass and draw the circumferences of them. "Okay, I can't do this," I said, tossing the crossword to the side.

"It can't be that hard."

"No, not that. I keep thinking about him. Every time I come up with a new, fun, cool activity, I just think about whether or not he would have liked it."

“Maybe you should call him.”

Why would he suggest that? “Call him? He hasn’t even bothered to call me, speak to me, email me, text me, nothing since I broke up with him, and you think I should be the one to call him?”

“No, but if you can’t stop thinking about him then something has to happen. He’s not even here and he keeps interrupting everything we do.”

“Do you think he’s even thought of me since then?”

Elvis pushed himself up out of the kiddie pool and took my hand, pulling me up out of mine with a force I didn’t know he possessed. “If this was one of those old black and white movies, I would slap you right now.”

“Then I’m glad it’s not?” What was he doing? And why was I suddenly walking behind him as he pulled me into my house? I was not done with my soda slushie!

“Okay, get dressed.”

“Dressed for what?”

“We’re going to the movies.”

“I liked my kiddie pool idea better.”

Elvis invaded my closet and pulled out a summer dress and some matching shoes. He had a really good eye for coordination. “We’re going to the movies, and you’re going to walk in there like you walk in everywhere, with that confident walk thing you naturally have going on, and you’re going to get every guy’s attention, and you’re going to flirt, and they’re going to flirt back, and you’re going to see why it’s a great idea to move on already.”

I still liked my kiddie pool idea better, but I showered and got dressed and spent about an hour and a half making my blond hair look so shiny, and refreshed, and bouncy, that people would probably end up thinking it couldn’t possibly be real. I was so talented.

Elvis had gone to his house to change for movie night, so it gave me some time to just look in the mirror and reflect as I applied my lip gloss. I saw myself, my made up self, ready to flirt, or at least have a good time. I was going to make sure that Elvis bought me popcorn. For the first time in a month, I genuinely smiled.

Diego

The suit that Nelli had had me fitted for looked darker and deeper than the suit I had already owned. If it was possible for the coat to be blacker than

mine, the navy blue tie to be more navy blue than mine, the white shirt to be whiter than mine, then it was. I felt like I was wearing something very expensive. I was picked up at my house by a limo and deposited at the Biltmore Hotel which I had never stepped into before. I always assumed that they did background checks on people to allow them onto their property, and I looked around waiting for security to push me back into the limo and send me back to where I had come from.

Nelli came running out of the hotel, looking both frazzled and relieved all at once. “You’re just in time.” She straightened my tie and fixed my suit.

“This isn’t normal,” I said using one of Nikki’s favorite phrases.

“Mhmm,” she said as she focused on my collar.

“No really, it’s not normal.”

“You look perfect,” she said. She stood back and assessed me. “Alright, let’s go.” Next thing I knew, I was trying to keep up with her as she hurried back into the hotel at record pace. We ended up in a large suite that had a couple of rooms. Nelli told me to make myself at home while she got dressed.

Making myself at home wasn’t much of a problem, since the suite looked like a home to begin with. I grabbed one of the bottles of water and opened it taking a much needed drink to calm my nerves and rehydrate my overwhelmed brain.

I was admiring the view of the golf course when the door flew open, and the woman I remembered as Nelli’s mom from Vizcaya, entered on a mission. “Nelli, are you ready? We have to get your hair done.” She stopped when she saw me.

Unsure of what to do, I smiled politely and said, “Hi.”

Nelli then came out to save the day. She was fussing with the back of her sleeveless black gown that draped so effortlessly over her body. “Mami, Delia said not to do anything crazy with my hair because they’re just going to have to undo it once the show starts.”

“Who is this?”

“This is Diego. My date.”

Her mother, who had barely noticed me at Vizcaya, zoomed in on me. She appeared to process every single detail about me with what I was sure was an invisible computer somewhere behind her eyes. She walked closer to me, then around me, and then stood next to Nelli with her arms crossed. “I’m impressed. Wherever did you find him?”

“Well,” Nelli said. I was surprised to see her hesitate, as if nervous. “Do you remember when we went to do my Quince portraits at Vizcaya? He was there. He was on the steps drawing.”

Recollection came to her mother’s eyes and she seemed even more intrigued. “How old are you?”

“Sixteen,” I answered promptly.

“What do your parents do?”

“My mom works at a law firm.”

“A lawyer,” she said excited.

“She’s the office manager.”

“Oh,” her face fell. “And your father?”

“I don’t have one of those.”

She didn’t like this answer much either, but at that moment the hairstylist came in. Nelli’s mom sent Nelli and the hairstylist into the other room, and then closed the door so she could have more interrogation time with me. I drank more water and tried to not look at her too closely. She was a beautiful woman and it wasn’t hard to see where Nelli got her looks.

“Diego,” she said as she poured herself a drink. “Are you Cuban?”

“Um, I don’t know. I could be. I guess.” I had asked my mom once what my dad’s nationality or ethnic origin or race was, but she had never given me any answers.

“What is your mother?”

“She’s Colombian.”

“Interesting,” she said as she took a drink from her glass. “Where do you go to school?” I told her and her face soured considerably. “Well what do you want to do with your life?” She was grasping for straws. She was trying to find something about me that would make this okay, because she wanted it to be okay, because when it all came down to it, she liked the way I looked. This knowledge was unnerving.

“I have no idea,” I said honestly. “I guess something to do with art.”

“Art? You’re an artist?” She found a silver lining.

“Yeah, well I hope to be. I mean, I’m not a professional or anything.”

“Do you have a portfolio?”

“No. I have a studio that I use though.” I wasn’t sure who I was helping out with this information: me, Nelli, or her mom.

“A studio? What is the address? I’ll stop by and see your work.”

I shouldn’t have mentioned the studio. “It’s not a real studio.”

“Is your artwork there?”

“Yes.”

“Then give me the address.”

I gave her the address and then she was called away to attend to some matter. I opened another bottle of water and downed it quickly, almost choking when the door opened and Nelli came out.

“Sorry,” I said coughing, “I thought it was your mom again.”

“I am so sorry, but I don’t have time to be that sorry. Are you ready?”

I put the nearly empty bottle down then looked at her now that her hair and make-up were done. Everything was in place except for the look in her eyes that gave away how panicked she was. But she knew, as well as I did, that no one tonight was going to be looking at her eyes when they looked at her.

“I’ve been ready,” I assured her, but I had never been less ready for anything.

As we walked to the elevator she explained to me what I was in for. Right now would be the champagne social hour where people would schmooze as they arrived. Then they would be escorted inside the ballroom for the fashion show. Afterwards, there would be an appetizer social for an hour, and then dinner would be served followed by dancing. I would’ve been able to handle these events just fine if she were with me, but I was going to lose her half an hour into this champagne social so she could get ready for the fashion show. Worse than that, I was going to be alone the entire fashion show. Then I was going to have to do the appetizer portion mostly by myself until she had changed back and could join me. I was starting to stress out.

The champagne social hour was held in a tropical inspired courtyard that was illuminated mostly by the natural sunlight that streamed in between the arches and green plants. A fountain bubbled in the middle, and already many people were gathered. They talked and drank their champagne as servers walked around with trays of small snacks.

Nelli glided through the crowd, taking my hand, and guiding me through as people said hello to her and complimented her on how wonderful she looked. It was hard to tell who was being sincere or who wasn’t.

“Have you seen my daughter anywhere?” her father said. Nelli gave the man a big hug that she needed more than he did. He hugged her back and looked her right in the eyes, “You okay?”

“Yeah, I’m fine.” She took my hand. “Papi, this is my friend, Diego. He’s my date for tonight.”

I got the once over again. “Diego, huh? You’re new.”

“He goes to a different school. It’s a long story,” Nelli deflected and then another man walked up to them. I instantly recognized him as the guy in the picture that I had uncovered at her birthday party in the penthouse. Again, Nelli’s arms went around this man, and he too looked at her unsure of her behavior. Then he looked at me.

“He’s new,” Nelli’s father said to the other guy. “His name’s Diego and he goes to a different school.”

“This is Trace,” Nelli said with her arm around the bigger man. “He’s my godfather.”

Trace looked me over as well. “New? Where’d you come from?”

“She says it’s a long story,” her father filled in.

“It is,” Nelli confirmed, “and Diego will get to tell you all about it when I get ready for the show.”

“Oh, well, we can’t wait to hear all about it,” her father said.

I knew that in a different time, at a different place, under very, very different circumstances, I really would’ve liked the guy.

“The suspense is killing me,” Trace agreed.

Him too.

Nelli pulled me away so that I could get some time to reclaim my thoughts. She grabbed two champagne glasses off the floating tray and handed me one, then clinked hers against mine. “Here’s to hoping I don’t trip and fall on the runway.”

“I hope you don’t trip and fall,” I said before taking a small drink from the glass. She knocked hers back in one, long gulp and handed me the empty glass.

“I’ve got to go. Stay away from my dad and Trace for as long as you can. My dad will start putting two and two together soon, so if he asks you about the island tell him that it was nice and you had fun hanging out with me and all of my friends.”

“I will do that.”

She smiled and gave me a quick kiss on my lips.

“You look perfect. Just be yourself. They’ll like you.”

She left me standing there, and I was left wondering exactly who *they* referred to: her parents, or her dad and Trace?

Nikki

Somehow, I was eating ice cream at a table full of students from my school. I knew them pretty well, but I had never hung out with them outside of a scholastic setting. We had all bumped into each other at the movies, and next thing I knew, Elvis and I had been assimilated into their group. It was mostly because the star soccer player in the group, Eric, had bought me gummy worms and begged for me to come see their movie with them instead. I was going to say no, but Elvis said yes on our behalf, and I ended up sitting between the two E's and having a great time.

A really great time.

Now I was eating ice cream and Eric kept asking me random questions about what I was doing this summer, and what it was like to work at the bagel shop, and how next summer he was definitely going to do the whole job thing. Eric was a cute guy. It wasn't the first time I had noticed this about him. He was in a lot of my classes so I had made this observation many times before.

I knew his family was Brazilian because one day in class during World Awareness Day, he had worn a shirt with the Brazilian flag on it and had brought in some sweet Brazilian dessert that I had liked very much. His smooth skin had a faint golden tan to it, and his eyes were a very light brown. Although he was cute, he had never looked all that interesting next to Diego. Without Diego around, though, Eric was suddenly more than interesting.

"So where's Diego?" One of the girls at our table asked. I looked at Elvis who just looked back at me waiting for me to react to this situation.

"I don't know," I told her. Then, maybe because I felt like this was a test and it was important for me to pass it, I added, "We broke up about a month ago. I haven't seen him since."

The table fell silent and the girl looked sorry that she had asked. "I'm so sorry. I didn't know."

"It's okay," I said. I twirled my spoon and dug back into my ice cream.

"The girls at school are so going to try and get with him when they find out," the other girl said. "I mean no offense."

"None taken," I said. "They can all compete for his attention if they like."

"And what about you?" Eric asked me. "Any tips on how to compete for yours?"

Oh I liked him. He was slick, and did I mention, cute? "Buying me gummy worms and ice cream is a good start."

He smiled at me, and I smiled at him, and Elvis pretended to gag which made the rest of the table crack up.

Nelli

Four dresses down. One more to go. I changed into the sea-green, ethereal, spaghetti strapped creation in record time. My hair was quickly sprayed, and matching eye shadow was quickly applied, as were green and silver flecks of powder. I went up the ramp and struck my pose then walked down the runway one last time. I spotted Diego and when I reached the end of the runway, I flirtatiously threw an over the shoulder kiss in his direction. The kiss was part of the show. Who I threw it to was my own choosing. As I walked back up the runway, I spotted John for the first time in the crowd, and saw his head turn from Diego to me.

I finished my walk and then waited for the finale when all the models would do one final walk together. Once that was over, and the show was done, I ran backstage and let out the biggest breath I had ever let out. I took off all the clothing in record time.

“Wasn’t she perfect, Delia? She was so perfect,” I heard Mami say as she came backstage. I got my black dress back on and then hugged her when she put her arms around me. “They couldn’t stop talking about you, baby. Everyone noticed you tonight.”

“You did a great job,” Delia said. She pat my back before going around to congratulate everyone for a job well done.

“I found you a new modeling agent,” Mami said. She grabbed the wipes and began to remove the make-up from my face. “He fell completely in love with you tonight. Hurry up and get ready so you can meet him during the appetizers.”

“Okay, Mami,” I said.

She gave me another proud hug and disappeared once more. I sat in the make-up chair, completely exhausted, and the make-up artist came back over on Mami’s instructions to strip my face of the stage make-up and reapply my normal make-up. The entire time she worked on my face, I held back the emotion to cry or scream or maybe just pass out. I was completely on edge, and I wanted to run away until I couldn’t run anymore. I asked the make-up artist if she had any aspirin, and she found me a bottle of Tylenol. I took three again and tried to mentally prepare myself for the rest of the evening.

Once my make-up was done and my hair was in place, I left the backstage area and went to find my mother. The appetizers were being served on floating trays as people drank wine and conversed loudly about the fashions and other non-fashion related topics. Everyone appeared to be having a great time, but I was feeling more panicked than ever. Then someone caught my arm, and I turned to see John.

“Hey,” I said to him. He was the last person I wanted to run into at the moment.

“Hey,” he said. “You were amazing up there.”

“Oh, thanks,” I said. “I didn’t know you were gonna be here.”

“Your mom invited us. She thought my mom would be interested.”

“Good. I’m glad. How is your mom?”

John didn’t answer that. He looked at me and let his eyes linger over mine. “What’s with you and that guy?”

“He’s a friend.” I looked around hoping to spot Mami, or Papi, or Trace, or Diego.

“That’s funny. You barely call us your friends.”

I let out a soft sigh with a humbled smile. “We’ll talk later, okay?”

“Sure,” John said. I left with a small wave and quickly moved through the room again, this time running right into Mami.

“Nelli, perfect timing.” She went on to introduce me to the modeling agent, who looked a lot like my last modeling agent, and he spoke about what he wanted to do with me and what he envisioned for me. Mami liked everything he had to say, but I was barely paying attention. I was surprised he didn’t pull out a contract right then and there.

It was announced that dinner was ready, and I finally found Diego as I walked into the ballroom. He looked confused and lost, and was at the mercy of a woman who kept holding his arm and speaking very close to his ear.

“Diego,” I said walking up to him. His blue eyes widened in relief as they begged for help. I put my arm around him, thanked the woman for helping him in, and pulled him away from her.

“That was scary,” he said to me as we walked away. “She was so wasted.”

“She was so something,” I agreed. When we got to our table, I motioned for him to pull out my seat. He got the hint and quickly did so, just in time for my parents to come in and see him do it. I placed the napkin on my lap and drank the water that was in the glass in front of me. “So you’ve survived so far.”

“This is surviving?” he asked drinking his water quickly as well. “I don’t think there’s any incentive in the world you can give me to ever do something like this again.”

“At least you have that choice.”

My head was spinning. By the time the food was brought out, the mere smell sent a wave of nausea over me. I took a couple of small bites of the chicken for show, but as I swallowed each piece, I could feel the bile rising in my throat. I tried to wash it down with some wine hoping that it could settle my stomach, or at the very least me.

“What did you think of the show?” Mami asked Diego. Then she turned to Papi to explain, “He’s an artist. Did you know that?”

“Yes, Vizcaya,” Papi said. Diego had obviously filled him in on the missing details.

“Isn’t that romantic?” Mami said looking between me and Diego. “They met at Vizcaya and have kept in touch this whole time.”

“I wouldn’t call it romantic,” Papi mumbled. He took a big bite of his steak.

“It’s kind of stalkerish,” Trace agreed.

“Yes, but who stalked who?” Trace’s wife asked.

“It wasn’t like that,” Diego answered for us. I was incapable of answering. If I opened my mouth, words wouldn’t have been what came out.

“What was it like then?” Papi asked. Diego looked at me, but again, I was no help.

“We just kind of became friends. It was a mutual type of thing.”

“I have to use the restroom,” I finally said, excusing myself. I barely registered that Diego had excused himself as well. My only focus was on getting out of the ballroom and finding the nearest restroom. I pushed open the door to the women’s room and walked into the first stall, dropping to my knees as the stall spun around me.

“Nelli.” It was Diego’s voice and I felt him behind me, putting his hand on my forehead, and trying to get me to look at him.

“I’m okay,” I whispered. I realized that all I really needed was to lie down and take a nap. I had been going strong since five a.m. It was now seven p.m. Perfect nap time.

“You don’t look okay.”

I said nothing and then felt the remnants of the two chicken pieces come back up. I quickly turned so that I vomited in the toilet and not on him. I’m sure he’d thank me for that later. It was hard to vomit when there wasn’t

much to get rid of, so after I dry heaved for a few minutes, I collapsed back into Diego who was still sitting behind me. I was so tired. He didn't say anything to me. I'm not sure what he was waiting for.

Then I just felt embarrassed and I put my hands over my face. "Oh my God. Oh my God," I repeated. "I am so sorry you had to see this."

"See what?" he asked. He reached past me to flush the toilet and then kept a hold of my waist. "Come on, get up. Let's find you a place to lie down."

I did as he instructed. I stopped at the sink to rinse my mouth out and freshen up, and then I held onto him as we walked to one of the empty conference rooms. Diego told me to sit in a chair and that he would be right back. I sat there waiting for him, feeling more embarrassed by the moment, and wondering if he really would come back. It would've been a great time for him to make a run for it. However, he did return, with a chaise lounge that he had stolen from the outside seating area. He placed it against the wall then took my hand and led me to it. He sat down and had me lie down with my head in his lap. He played with my hair as I looked up at him.

"You weren't supposed to see me like this," I said. My voice sounded hoarse.

"Like what?"

"I bet you think I'm such a loser."

"I definitely don't think that."

"So then what are you thinking?"

He seemed to systematically be parting my hair into sections. At least that's how it felt. "I'm thinking of when I first saw you at Vizcaya. How perfect you looked in those gardens. I always equate you with the gardens, and tonight you were the perfect representation of them."

"What do you mean?" What was he talking about? How much wine had he had to drink?

"The gardens at Vizcaya are always beautiful. But they're always beautiful because someone is always fixing them, cutting them, primping them, shaping them, molding them. That's what I saw tonight. Everyone here was trying so hard to make you beautiful, and then you paraded for them so they could applaud how beautiful they made you."

I bit my lip hard and tried to think of a way to make him change the subject, but again, I knew opening my mouth wouldn't have the desired effect.

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“You want to hear something funny?” Diego continued. “People always ask me what I want to do with my life, and I never have an answer for them. After tonight, I’m willing to bet that no one’s ever asked you what you wanted to do with yours.”

I still stayed quiet.

“What do you want to do with your life, Nelli?”

I just wanted to take a nap. I closed my eyes and didn’t answer him, and finally my nap came to me.

20: DATES

Nikki

Holy coffee blenders! How many coffee drink orders was it really necessary for one person to make? I felt like telling the guy that this all would've gone a lot smoother if his entire office had come with him and personally ordered their drinks. Then I felt bad for the guy because he obviously had drawn the short end of the stick. Or worse, this *was* his job. I gave him a free bagel for morale and sent him and his five million coffee drinks on their way.

"Miss, we need a refill over here please," Eric joked. Elvis laughed then returned to his Sudoku when I glared at him.

"Do I look like a waitress?"

Eric got up and brought his cup over, leaning across the counter while he waited for me to refill it for him. I put the lid on it and passed it across the counter back to him.

"So after your shift is done, do you want to come over?" Eric asked. "We can play video games or watch a movie."

"So long as you don't mind me smelling like bagel."

"I like how you smell. So cool. It's a date."

A date? I looked at Elvis who smirked at me from behind his Sudoku book. "Cool."

I worked a little faster after that, as if somehow that would make the time fly by super-quick. It sort of did the trick, and I was cleaning up and rinsing

things out before I knew it. I clocked out and practically skipped out of the bagel shop with the two E's.

Until Elvis said, "I have to get home. You two have fun."

I had been double crossed! Eric smiled at me and pointed to his car. He had a car.

"You have a car."

"Yeah, you knew that."

I did? I hadn't really remembered him mentioning it before. A car. The possibilities were endless. No more Metro? Eric was the best guy ever. I let him open the door for me. I sat all demurely in his car as I folded the apron onto my lap before putting it in my new purple-glittery-with-dangling-star-charms backpack. I put my seatbelt on and Eric told me that I could put on any radio station that I wanted. I put it on a dance station that made me dance in my seat, and that made Eric laugh at me dancing in my seat.

We arrived at a small, one story, old Miami house where the door was left open so that the breeze could come in and cool the rooms. A chocolate lab bounced over and Eric leaned down to pet him. "This is Pelé," he said, and I got the reference instantly.

"Like the soccer player."

"Yeah," he said with a smile. "You know about Pelé."

"Who doesn't?" I asked him. Growing up in Miami there were two names that were often heard on the school yard once the boys got together to play soccer. Pelé was one. The other was Beckham. I pet the dog as well, and he was the sweetest thing. He sniffed my hand and then tried to lick it.

Once inside the home, Eric introduced me to his grandmother, and then to his mother who was in the kitchen cooking something that smelled out of this world. He asked me if I had a preference between playing a video game and watching a movie, and I told him I was up for a video game. To my surprise, he set it up in the very living room his grandmother was watching TV.

"Are we interrupting her?" I asked.

"No, she likes watching us play anyway."

"Oh," I smiled at the lady who was smiling at me too. I sat on the floor with him. "Who's us?"

"Me and my brother. He's out with my dad getting some stuff for the new shed my dad is building. They'll be home later."

That was so sweet. Eric had a real family, with parents, and a sibling, and a grandmother. And his mom cooked real food, and they had family time,

and his grandmother liked to watch them play games. This was the best date ever.

Diego

I had expected Nelli's mom to call and give me a few days warning, but I hadn't heard from her. Nelli hadn't mentioned anything more about it so I figured that her mom had just been kidding about seeing my artwork. This is the reason that it scared the crap out of me when she showed up out of the blue with some random guy I had never met before.

"Hello, Diego," she said stepping in and looking around. "Well, this really is a studio. I know nothing about art so I brought my friend with me. He's an art dealer so he's better equipped to determine if you have any real talent."

I closed the door in a daze, still trying to process that she was there. Her art dealer friend immediately went to the painting I was working on. "Mhmm," he said and then he paced around the studio as he went from one piece to the next. Nelli's mom seemed intrigued as well as she began to look at each painting. Had I had the right amount of warning, I would've hid all the ones of Nelli.

"Does my daughter spend a lot of time here?" she asked me.

"Not a lot," I lied. "She comes over sometimes and we hang out. Usually we go to the beach."

"Who's paying for this studio?"

"My mom."

"Mhmm," the dealer said again as he looked at one of the paintings I did on the island.

Nelli's mom then saw the piece over the futon and looked at it for what seemed like forever. "This is from her photos for the Quince," she observed.

"It's what I was drawing at Vizcaya when I met her," I explained.

Her mother turned her intrigued eyes to me. "Let me be frank with you, Diego." She crossed her arms. "My daughter is a very sweet girl. We may have spoiled her unnecessarily, but whatever the case; she has a very bright future ahead of her. If you plan on being part of that future, then you're going to have to play by our rules. Otherwise, you don't get to play at all. Do you understand?"

No. How was I supposed to respond to that? Play along with what? And future? I could care less about the future. "Nelli and I are just friends."

“Yes, I can see that. Where are the paintings of all your other friends?”

“Mhmm,” the dealer said again. Then he saved me from having to lie again when he walked over to us. “You definitely have talent. And the passion is there. What you need is a mentor and advanced formal training. Where do you study?”

“Study?”

“Art school?”

“He goes to a public school,” Nelli’s mother said with what sounded like disgust.

“Yes, then you definitely need formal training,” he said again. Then he addressed Nelli’s mom. “Call Mario and see if he’ll take him under his wing.”

“Mario,” her mother said. “Of course. I should’ve thought of Mario.”

“Very similar styles, you see,” the dealer said.

“Yes, it makes perfect sense.” She then looked at me. “Diego, have you made your choice?”

Choice? What was I supposed to be choosing? I had no idea what she was even asking me. “We’re just friends,” I reiterated.

“No one is ever just friends with my daughter,” she said.

I realized what my choices were. My chest felt tighter and I wished this lady would just disappear.

“Okay,” I said. “You win. I’ll play by your rules.”

She smiled and placed her hand on my shoulder. “I knew you were a smart boy. I’ll call Mario and tell him that he’ll have a new apprentice. Mario never says no to me. He’ll help you put together a portfolio as well. I’ll expect to see you at the house more often for dinner, and I’ll send you a list of events that Nelli will need to bring a date for.” She then took her hand off my shoulder and looked around the studio. “This studio will do for now. We’ll look at something bigger in the future. I don’t like the idea of my daughter spending so much time in such a cramped environment.”

I just looked at her. What else was I supposed to do?

“I’ll also be in touch,” the dealer said. “In case any exhibits open up that may have space.”

“That’s brilliant,” Nelli’s mother gushed to him. Then she looked at me again, taking me in just as she did at the charity function. “It’s a shame you don’t know your father. I would have liked to have seen how he looked.” She left my studio and I felt like she took something with her, but I couldn’t figure out what it was that was suddenly missing.

Nelli

Danielle and I were sitting on my bed, painting our toenails, and listening to a playlist of our favorite songs. I had opted for a cherry color while Danielle went for a more blood-red shade. I had suggested a few weeks ago that we should talk and clear the air which Danielle was more than ready to do. It was never hard for me to get my friends back when I was ready for them again. They were usually waiting for my call.

“So, when are we doing our double date?” Danielle asked. The main leverage I had used to get Danielle back was to make her privy to Diego before anyone else.

“Soon. Trust me. You’re going to so approve.”

“I bet. The way John’s talking about him, he must be a threat.”

“What’s John saying?”

“You know. He says he looks like one of those pretty boys on TV. And that apparently you’ve been seeing him for a while since he was at your party.”

“John’s just upset because he knows that he won’t be my first anymore.”

Danielle’s mouth fell open and she looked at me with a smile she couldn’t contain. “Are you saying that you’re planning on giving it up to Diego?”

“Oh, I’m not planning. It’s already been planned. Papi’s going to New York for business, and Mami’s going on her trip to Italy that she does every year, so the house is all mine. I even bought the prettiest lingerie ever for the night.”

“That’s so evil. I love it,” Danielle said. “Are you going to be his first too?”

I frowned slightly. “No. But that works out better for me doesn’t it? An experienced guy.”

“Way better. When Ezra and I did it for the first time, I almost fell asleep. Come to think of it, I don’t think he ever actually got it in.”

I looked at her horrified. “That is so not going to happen with us.”

“It’s not. You’re so lucky, Nel. I just hope John never finds out.”

“What do you mean? He has to find out. And you’re the perfect person to tell him. The day after, I’ll call you and confirm that it happened. Then you should set up an outing for you, Lindsey, and John where you fill them in.”

Danielle looked a little unsure about this. “That’s kind of mean.”

VIZCAYA

“Mean? No it’s perfect. Lindsey will be there to console John. And they’ll finally get together, and the six of us all live happily ever after. Look at the big picture, Dani.”

“I thought you didn’t care about Lindsey anymore?”

“I don’t. But if she gets John off my hands then she’ll seriously become my new best friend.” Danielle smiled with me, but I could tell she didn’t seem to think it was as amusing as I did.

21: THE FIRST TIME

Diego

I wasn't excited to meet any of Nelli's friends, especially after having sort of gotten the general gist of what they were like at her birthday party. I was assured that the blond guy wouldn't be there, so at least I wouldn't have to worry about pulling him off her today. They picked me up at the house, and Nelli opened the back door so that I could slide in beside her.

"Diego, this is Ezra and Danielle. Guys this is Diego."

"A pleasure," Ezra said as he checked his mirrors and took off.

"You are way hotter in person than in your pictures," Danielle said. She winked at Nelli. I looked at Nelli who smiled and cuddled into me.

"Thanks, I think," I said. Nelli took my hand and squeezed it to reassure me that this was a good idea. I squeezed it back and wondered where it was we were going in the first place, but I didn't have to wonder for long. We ended up at an ocean front restaurant. The hostess seated us by the window which had a perfect view of the cruise ships coming in and out of the Port of Miami.

"Normally we sit outside," Danielle said, "but this heat is unbearable today."

Nelli took my hand and held it as she looked at the menu. I looked as well and wondered if she held it because she was afraid I'd run once I saw the prices. Even the side salad was pricey. The waiter came around to take our drink orders and I told him water was fine.

“So, Diego,” Danielle said again, obviously wanting to get the full scoop, “Nelli says you’re an artist. Do you like draw anime and stuff?”

“I don’t really do anime. I, um, like to draw beautiful things, natural things, like the ocean and stuff.”

“That sounds kind of boring,” Ezra chimed in. “You ever draw naked girls?”

“Seriously?” Danielle asked her boyfriend with an annoyed tone. He shrugged and looked at me for an answer.

“No, not really,” I disappointed him.

“He drew me in my bikini if that counts,” Nelli offered.

“That’s pretty hot,” Ezra said.

Danielle smacked him then asked me a new question. “So, what kind of music are you into?”

The waiter returned with our drinks and then we placed our orders. I ordered the chicken because it was the cheapest thing on their menu. I suddenly wished I was at home eating lunch with Nikki and Elvis while listening to music instead of trying to think of the music I listened to. I wondered what they would be doing today.

“Music, um, I like different things. It depends on my mood.”

“I’m the same way,” Nelli said. She looped her arm through mine and leaned into me. I looked at her and she smiled and popped a kiss on my lips. I smiled back at her.

“God you guys are cute,” Danielle said.

“So, Nelli, any big plans for your sixteenth birthday?” Ezra asked. “We’re all wondering how you’re going to outdo your last one.”

“I haven’t planned anything yet,” Nelli said. “I was thinking of making it a small, low-key thing.”

Danielle was quick to interpret what this obviously meant in her world. “That’s such a great idea, Nel. Exclusive is so the way to go. It’ll be so much fun to come up with the guest list.”

“You should rent out a club,” Ezra said, “VIP all the way.”

The entire time they talked about what Nelli should do for her sixteenth birthday, all I could think of was what we had done for Nikki’s sixteenth birthday. I could visualize all over again how Nikki looked in her rose-colored gown as she walked around the gardens of Vizcaya, and how she had worn a tiara and looked happier than she let on. I still had the pictures that Elvis had given me from the photo shoot, and I suddenly had the desire to look through them.

When the food came out, Danielle and Ezra kept interrogating both me and Nelli about various things, and then Danielle finally observed, “You don’t talk a lot do you?”

I looked at her unsure of how to reply to that. I thought I talked enough. “I don’t have a lot to say.”

“You talk enough for everyone,” Ezra said to his girlfriend and the focus shifted from me to them as they argued back and forth about whether or not she talked a lot. Nelli gave me a look that made me unsure of why she hung out with these people in the first place, and I gave her a look that showed her I understood. I focused on eating my over-priced chicken.

Nikki

Eric kissed me. It was the first time he kissed me. And I kissed him back. So this was the first time we kissed. Wow. We had gone to a park that was near Eric’s house. His mom had made us sandwiches, and we were having a little picnic under the large and shady shelter of a banyan tree.

We had spent an hour pushing each other on swings and racing each other down slides before the hunger bug had bit us. It was after I had finished my tasty ham and cheese sandwich that he had decided to kiss me, and I had decided to kiss him back, and we had kissed for the first time. He was a very nice kisser, a soft kisser, a tender kisser, like if he wasn’t sure I could survive a kiss from him.

I smiled shyly at him and popped a grape in my mouth.

“Too soon?” he asked. I could tell he didn’t want to mess this up.

“No, no, I liked it. You’re a very nice kisser.” Hopefully he wouldn’t ask me if that meant he wasn’t a good kisser. I had only kissed one boy in my whole entire life, and unfortunately for Eric, the only way I could compare the two fairly was by saying that Eric was a nice kisser.

“Nice?” He knew that wasn’t the best compliment. “Should I try again?”

I nodded and he leaned in again to kiss me, this time putting a little more effort into it, but it was still nice. Suddenly, I realized why. Eric was kissing me respectfully, like someone who was interested, but didn’t want to cross any lines that I may not be ready to cross. He simply didn’t know me. Diego, on the other hand, knew me so well that he knew exactly how to kiss me that first time at the illegal bonfire when he had made his first move.

At the bonfire, he kissed me in a way that showed that he would give it his all, and if I didn't like it then that was that. At least he had tried. Diego's first kiss had been hotter than the bonfire heat, brighter than the bonfire embers, and erratic like the bonfire flames. In comparison, Eric's kiss was a soft, controlled, candlelight on a cold, winter day. How weird that this was the first time I started thinking that maybe Diego hadn't kissed me because I was the only girl available, but because he actually *liked* me. However, that didn't change the fact that he had never drawn me or looked at me in the way he had looked at Nelli.

"I must be a really bad kisser," Eric said as he watched me disappear into my thoughts.

"No, you're not. You're a really good kisser," I reassured him. "I like the way you kiss. A lot. And it's not that this is too soon, it's just that...I guess I'm not ready yet. Not because of you, it's just..." How could I explain that I was comparing him to my ex-boyfriend in a way that didn't sound bad?

"I understand," he said saving me from having to come up with a solution for this dilemma. "I can wait until you're ready."

He was so sweet. So perfectly sweet. Like cinnamon-flavored-hot-cocoa-with-whip-cream-and-extra-sugar sweet. Stupid Diego for ruining my awesome moment with super sweet Eric.

"So how are you on the monkey bars?" Eric asked as he got up.

"I love them! I like sitting on top of them and hanging upside down."

"Then let's go." He held his hand out for me. I let him pull me up. Once I was back on my feet, I grabbed him around the waist and gave him a really tight hug.

"Each hug like that is a kiss I owe you," I explained. Then I skipped over to the monkey bars.

Nelli

Diego knew something was up when he walked into my room and saw the lit candles. He stood still in my room, unsure of what his reaction was supposed to be as I sat on my bed. I leaned back on my hands and crossed my ankles as I beckoned him with my body language to come and join me.

He took his sneakers off and sat on my bed, facing me.

"So your parents are out of town?"

“Yep,” I said. I rocked my feet back and forth so that they tapped the side of his leg teasingly.

“I bet that gets lonely.”

“Very.”

He didn't know what to say after that, and I watched him look around the room again. I then sat up straight and moved myself closer to him, scooting myself onto his lap and wrapping my arms around his neck. “So you'll stay tonight, right?” I asked him.

“I guess,” he said, and I kissed him because that was the right answer. It didn't matter how confident I was that I could get Diego to do whatever I wanted him to do tonight. The truth was that the entire night could end in disaster if I didn't do every little thing right. I had learned that if I came on too strong, he would be put off, but if I let him take the lead, he was a bit more responsive. So I broke off the kiss and leaned back again, this time laying down completely and smiling at him while he decided what he wanted to do next.

I didn't say anything while his mind raced. I didn't move while his eyes travelled over me, taking in my tiny, satin slip dress. I was used to teasing boys, giving them something to work with, and it took everything in me to just lie there and not use my usual tricks. I was a virgin in the purest sense of the word, but I had kissed, and made out, and done other risqué and naughty things many times before with other boys. Diego would hopefully finish what those boys had only been able to start.

He finally made his move. He touched his fingers to my leg and let them trail over my skin. His fingers felt strong, like if they could leave a sizeable bruise if he applied just the right amount of pressure. I continued to remain still. Even when his hand came very close to the place between my thighs I most wanted him to touch. His hand went up to my belly, taking my dress up with it, and then he reached my chest and then finally slid his fingers up to my neck. His body had followed the trajectory of his fingers, and now that he was beside me, he placed his lips on my neck, kissing me softly, and licking just the right areas to make me feel like I was on edge.

Never had I experienced anything as exciting or sensual as this, and every little thing he did was slow and masterfully thought out and executed. It almost seemed as if he was painting me, as if he was creating me into a work of art. When he could no longer restrain himself, that's when I knew I had him. That's when I started to move, and touch him back, and take the liberty

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of kissing him as hard as I wanted to. I didn't hide my desperation or how badly I wanted this because by then his desperation was just as evident.

My first time was exactly what I wanted it to be. It was exactly as I had always pictured it, and with a boy far superior to any I had imagined. When we were done, he held me close against him. I fell asleep breathing in his intoxicating scent of musky sweat, mixed with slight cologne and a light trace of acrylic paint.

22: END OF VACATION

Diego

I wasn't ready for summer to be over. The idea of going back to school felt stifling and counterproductive. Already, I was getting used to spending my time either painting at the studio, or hanging out with Nelli, or playing basketball with Billy, or learning things from Nelli's mother's friend Mario, the painter. Mario saw things just like I did, and painted them just like I did, and thought of life exactly how I did.

"Did you graduate high school?" I asked Mario. I sat at an easel in his studio and worked on painting a still life he had created for me out of coral, saltine crackers, lemons, and a coffee mug.

"Yep," he said. Mario was a lanky guy in his thirties who hadn't shaved in weeks, had wild, wavy brown hair to his shoulders, and looked like he had been homeless his whole life. In fact, he was from an upper crust family and rebelled by living the bohemian lifestyle, or so he said. "Why? Thinking of quitting?"

"I just don't think there's anything for me there," I admitted. I liked painting the lemons and focused on them more.

"I understand," Mario said, "I bet you're pretty bored."

"Pretty bored is putting it mildly."

Mario liked to paint standing. He worked on a large mural that was mounted on his wall. So far it involved a seascape and a turtle. He stepped back from it to assess how it was coming together. "Here's the thing. You can quit, and live the life of a starving artist, and hope that the freelance work

comes in just as you need to pay the next bill, or,” he grabbed a new brush seeing a direction he wanted to try and take the painting, “you can stay in school, graduate, and live the life of a starving artist and hope that the freelance work comes in just as you need to pay the next bill.”

“So you’re saying it doesn’t make a difference?”

“It depends. Do you love painting enough to make it your job, or do you love painting too much to ever have it be ruined by becoming your job?”

“I don’t know. It wasn’t until Christmas that I even thought of it as something I could do for a career.”

He stepped back again, reconsidering his choice. “Well what were you planning on being then?”

“I don’t know. I never thought about it.”

“Then if I were you, I’d stay in high school until I figured a few more things out.” He began painting again.

I tried to capture the lighting on the lemons, realizing that my angle didn’t capture the best illumination of them. I worked around it by bringing out the different shades of canary yellow, burnt sienna, and gold all mixed together to create the most realistic texture of the lemon. I worked hard on capturing this because it kept my mind off the main reason I didn’t want to go to school tomorrow. It was the only way I wouldn’t run into Nikki.

I missed Nikki. I missed seeing her golden smile, and canary hair, and colorful clothes. I missed how she always made sure that I was okay, or that I had done what I was supposed to do, or how she would make me lunch sometimes, or come over to make sure I had the soda I liked stocked in the house because she knew my mom hadn’t gone grocery shopping. I missed how I could talk to her about anything, and she always knew what to say, and how pretty she would look when she would read one of her books or do something on her laptop while I painted and got lost in my own world.

Mr. Alvarez had scared me with his words that Nikki and I couldn’t be friends like how we used to be, and because of that, I had been scared to see her again. In my fantasy world, the one where lemons were always perfectly illuminated no matter what angle you were looking at them from, I would see Nikki and all would be forgotten. We would go back to being best friends, and she would forgive me for not having come to get a bagel. I would tell her that I still cared about her and that we needed things to go back to how they were.

I concentrated on shading the lemons.

Nelli

I finished my final routine perfectly, with the type of grace and strength that girls spend their whole lives in dance class trying to achieve. And when I was done, I looked at Ms. Rosa for her approval. She considered me for a moment and then walked over to me, clasped her hands and held them before her mouth for a moment before speaking.

“That was powerful.”

I smiled, feeling accomplished and really happy that I could please Ms. Rosa. I would’ve been so upset if I felt that I had wasted her time.

“I felt it was powerful,” I admitted. “Something came over me. It was like a new emotion.”

“Nelli,” she said, “when you told your mother you didn’t want to be a professional dancer, what made you tell her that?”

“I’m not sure. Maybe I just wanted to see her reaction. Maybe I thought I’d see how she’d react to dancing before I told her all the other things I don’t want to do that she expects me to do.”

A small smile appeared on Ms. Rosa’s face as if she understood. “Do you remember what I told you? About how you had to decide when it was time for you to make your own decisions? That dance you just did? That was not the dance of a child. That was the dance of a woman. A woman who has experienced many emotions. Many mature emotions. So I’m going to ask you a question again, woman to woman, only this time it’s the opposite question. Do you want me to talk to your mother about having you continue your training?”

It was as if she knew that my heart had felt a pang of sadness at knowing that this was my last class for the summer. Mami, of course, would love for me to stay on, but she already has conceded to me doing all of my dancing on the dance team at school. Ms. Rosa spoke again because I was taking too long to answer.

“This is it for you. You can choose to walk out of here and go back to your dance team. Or, you can choose to continue to train, not because she wants you to, but because you want to.”

I had no idea how to respond to this. I wasn’t used to being the one to make the decisions about my future. I loved dancing. I could deny it all I wanted, and say that it was what my mother wanted me to do, but I loved it. I loved how I could get lost in my own world when I danced, how I could imagine the different scenarios, the different stories, the different realities of

what I was performing through each piece. It was a way to tell all of the stories locked inside of me without ever having to write a single word.

I focused on Ms. Rosa, but I think she already knew my answer. “I’d like to continue my training.”

She looked relieved and she pulled me into a hug and rubbed my back. “I knew you wouldn’t walk away from your passion.” She let go of me and I looked at her for clarification.

“My passion? I don’t know if dancing is my passion.”

“Yes you do. You do know. You know because there was no reason for you to keep coming every week for this class with the way I was treating you. You didn’t come to class to learn from me. You came to class because you felt you needed to. This is your home. This is your passion.”

I looked at Ms. Rosa in a new light at that moment. She had done it on purpose. She had tested me by seeing if I would quit, and she had done it just so that she could prove to me, no, so that I could prove to myself, that nothing could stop me from doing this. I hugged Ms. Rosa again to thank her, and she hugged me back then left to call my mother.

Nikki

I couldn’t believe summer was over. It had just started getting good. I bagged up an onion bagel for the guy at the counter, and gave him his change and sent him on his way.

Eric got up from his table and popped over. “How many more minutes?”

“Sit down,” I told him and he laughed and went to sit back down.

The next customer came, and I took his order. I could see Eric hovering and making weird signs toward the guy at the counter. Elvis tried hard to contain his laughter. I did too because Eric was very good at making me laugh, and I didn’t want this guy to think I was laughing at him. When the guy left, I balled up a straw wrapper and threw it at Eric, but he ducked and it hit Elvis instead. Now the three of us were in hysterics, and I knew that my boss was probably in the back happy that today was my last day on the job. Eric puckered up and gave me an air kiss and I did an air kiss back because we were that kind of couple. Well if we could be called a couple.

Elvis then suddenly straightened up, and I took that as a sign that I had a customer so I turned my attention to the new person at my cash register, and then I froze. Suddenly Eric no longer existed. I felt small needles poking my

heart, and I tried my best to pull myself together and get through this moment without incident.

“What would you like to order?” I said in my best professional voice, but it wasn’t perky or anything because I wasn’t that great at pulling myself together.

“Um,” Diego said as he realized that maybe he should’ve look at the menu. He glanced up at the menu boards above me and then looked back at me, “I’ll just have a plain bagel.”

“You want cream cheese or butter on it?”

“Cream cheese is fine.”

“Anything to drink?”

“Do you think we could talk?”

Why was he here? He waited until the last day before school started to come here? Really? How was this right? Or fair? Why had he bothered coming at all? And most important of all, why did he have to look so good? Was this a new outfit he was wearing? It totally was because I definitely didn’t recognize it. It was kind of preppy if I really thought about it. Oh my God, did Nelli buy him this outfit? Oh my God!

“Anything to drink?” I asked him again.

“I’ll have water.”

“Cup water or bottled?”

“Nikki...”

“Nikki,” Eric then said getting up from the table, “is everything okay?” Look at that. Knights in shining armor did exist.

“Everything’s fine,” I told him. I hoped he saw in my eyes that he should just sit down and let me handle this. Elvis got the look loud and clear because he motioned for Eric to sit.

I turned to my co-worker and told her I was going on a quick break. She was a cool girl so I knew she would totally cover for me. I motioned for Diego to follow me outside. The heat was ungodly. Maybe we should’ve done this inside.

“So what do you want to talk about?” I crossed my arms. “I don’t have a lot of time.”

“I wanted to apologize. I’m really sorry about how things went down, and I’m really sorry that I took so long to come and see you. You were my best friend and you didn’t deserve to have me treat you like that.”

Were? And best friend? Not girlfriend? Wow, I had really kidded myself the whole time we were together hadn’t I? I had no idea what I was supposed

to say to this. Was I just supposed to accept his apology and tell him everything was okay?

“Are you and Nelli together now?” I looked him right in the eyes.

He hesitated as if he didn’t know how to answer that question. “I think so. We pretty much are,” he finally said. The knife that was in my back twisted around.

“Then what are you apologizing for, Diego?” I said losing my cool. My arms became uncrossed by themselves and I could feel my patience wearing thin. “You’re not sorry. This is exactly what you wanted.”

“This isn’t what I wanted. I never wanted to lose you.”

“What did you want? The both of us? You thought you could two-time us and everything would be okay?”

“That’s not what I wanted. I don’t know what I wanted. Do you honestly think I thought about any of this?”

He had a point there. When did Diego ever think of anything having to do with the future and making decisions? But still. That didn’t change the facts of the situation.

“Well maybe you should have. Maybe that could’ve saved us all a lot of grief.”

“Whatever, Nikki. It looks like you moved on pretty well.” He motioned toward the restaurant.

“I moved on well? I can’t even...” I stopped myself and put my hands up in surrender. “Forget it. There’s no point in this. We broke up. You’re with Nelli. I’m with Eric. Everyone has a first love, and that’s all we were to each other. I mean, it wasn’t even love. It was like puppy love right? We should probably just say good-bye and it was nice knowing you and leave it at that.”

He seemed disturbed by my reaction, and I hated that I knew why. My suggestion was illogical, and I never made illogical suggestions. He was so confused. The way his eyes squinted and his eyebrows came together made me want to smack him for looking so adorable and kissable at that moment.

“Nikki,” he attempted, “I don’t think I can go to school tomorrow and not say hi to you, or acknowledge you. I really want to try and work on our friendship.”

I almost told him where he could take his friendship and put it, but then I thought about how if he actually showed up to school tomorrow, my heart would soar. And I knew that if he said hi to me, I wouldn’t be able to stop myself from saying hi back. And I knew all this because he had been my best friend, and I missed my best friend, too. But I also knew that now when I

walked down the hallway and Diego said hi to me, I would be walking hand in hand with Eric, and it wouldn't be like it used to be ever again.

"Let's just play it by ear," I told him. "I'll see you tomorrow."

I went back inside the bagel store where Elvis and Eric were running back to their table. They sat and tried to look innocent as I walked by them. I thanked my co-worker and took my spot again behind the counter. I looked out at where I could see Diego looking at me through the window. Then he turned and walked away toward the bus stop.

Elvis came up to the counter. "So what happened? Did you tell him to take a hike?"

"You know," I said leaning on the counter and looking at Elvis, "I'm not sure what happened, and I'm not sure what I told him, but I do know one thing."

"What's that?"

"I really missed him."

I expected Elvis to look annoyed by this, or call me hopeless, or reach across the counter and slap me like they would've done in a black and white movie, but instead Elvis just said, "Yeah. Me too."

I looked at him surprised, but he went back to the table to sit with Eric, and then I suddenly felt guilty as I watched Eric try to get information from Elvis. I sucked at this girlfriend, or possible girlfriend, thing.

23: FIRST DAY OF SCHOOL

Nikki

For the first day of school, I had put together an ensemble that was so cute that I had to take a picture of myself for posterity. I started with jeans. I didn't tend to default to jeans because usually it was too hot for that kind of thing, but I started with jeans anyway. They were dark jeans with red hearts on the back pockets and the cutest red, glittery belt ever. Then I put on a screen tee with red hearts on a gray background, but it looked like graffiti and was pretty wild. Then I tugged on my red ankle boots with the three inch heels that I had found on clearance just last week. They were the primary reason I had gone with the jeans. With a few bangles, several silver charms and different length necklaces, and my hair perfectly in place, I was ready to take on the first day of my junior year.

But it only got better from there. No longer did I have to wait at the bus stop. I waved to Elvis who was walking fast in my direction, and I strutted my way straight to Eric's car. Not only did he offer to be Elvis and I's ride to school from now on, but he was actually on time too. So far, junior year was awesome.

"How many classes do we have together this year?" Eric asked. I pulled out my schedule and pulled his out from his backpack so that I could compare them. We were two out of four when I landed on my fifth period class. I had completely forgotten that I had signed up for art again so that I could be in class with Diego. At the time, I never imagined that I wouldn't be

with him. Now I was stuck in a class that was all, completely, inspired, made for, and about him. This was so not good.

“Four,” I told him still looking at the art class on my schedule.

“Same as last year,” Eric observed.

“Yeah, isn’t that cool?” I played off.

When we got to school, I was having a debate in my mind. Should I march into the front office and demand that my schedule be changed, or should I suck it up and just go to the only class I would have with Diego? I decided to let fate decide. While I walked down the hallway hand-in-hand with Eric to our first period class, I placed a bet with myself.

If Diego showed up to school on time, then it was a sign that he was making an effort, and therefore; I should make an effort and keep the class so we could work on our friendship. However, if Diego came in late as he always did, then I would switch out the class for something else entirely. Content with this bet, I strolled down the hallway until Eric was intercepted by some of his friends. I stood beside him, smiling at them, and being introduced formally to the ones that I hadn’t hung out with yet.

They started talking about soccer, and my mind and eyes wandered as I looked around the hallway. Everyone was talking loud, saying hi to the friends they hadn’t seen all summer, or still trying to work out their new locker combinations. And then two girls saw something that made them stop, stare, and then conspire in a whisper before giggling and looking back at whatever it was. I looked to see what had caught their attention, and there opening his locker was Diego.

“Sorry about that. I bet you were bored,” Eric said as the first warning bell rang.

“Oh, no,” I said. I turned my attention back to him, and we resumed walking down the hallway hand-in-hand. “I love when you talk soccer. You’re so passionate about it.” We were three steps away from Diego, but I stayed focused.

“So that definitely means you’re coming to my games this year right?”

Diego shut his locker and turned just in time to see us walking.

“Definitely. I’ll be your cheerleader. I’ve got lots of spirit.” We walked by him, and I thought I did a good job of pretending to not notice him.

“Yes you do,” Eric agreed with me and then he let go of my hand to open the door to our first period class. He was such a gentleman.

I thanked him and walked in. I chose to sit in front like I always liked to do. I knew Eric liked to be close to the front so he sat right behind me. We

continued our conversation, but as soon as the bell rang, I turned forward. My eyes went to the teacher and my mind thought about how I was going to be stuck in art again for the rest of this semester.

Nelli

I was glad that I was finally a sophomore. All last year I never felt like a freshman, and since I was in the advanced track in school, my electives had only had a few of my fellow freshmen in them to begin with. Sophomore year would be the same and I would be in classes mostly with juniors. This meant more classes with John. Not eager to see him in class yet, I lingered at my locker and decorated it just how I wanted for the new school year.

“Hey, Nelli,” said a boy that had never talked to me in my life. I think he was on the basketball team. “You’re looking good this year,” he said. Then he looked me up and down. That was awkward. I looked at him like he had lost his mind, and then Brody walked up to me and put his arm on the locker behind me as he leaned into me.

“Heard you had a fun summer. Next time look me up.”

Some guy next to Brody laughed and looked at me in the way the basketball player did. Then I heard my locker slam shut and looked to see Danielle give the boys a dirty look. She grabbed my hand and led me out of there fast. We went into the girls’ restroom where Danielle quickly checked the stalls and then looked at me.

“The whole school knows you’re no longer a virgin.”

This took a moment for me to process. By the whole school, she couldn’t have really meant the whole school. But something inside of me slowly began to process what she said. I felt as if the entire bathroom was suddenly caving in on me.

“I think it was Lindsey,” Danielle continued. “When I told her and John about it she had this look on her face like she was plotting something evil, but I never thought it would be something like this. I mean, what kind of a person do you have to be to do this to someone?”

Our school was a small, private, exclusive school where word got around fast. It was also the type of school where people were looking for any excuse to climb the ranks. So if someone like me, who was well-liked, on the dance team, in several service clubs, and who came from a well-known and very

wealthy family could be taken down, then it would leave a nice spot to fill on the school social hierarchy.

I suddenly felt very sick. Last year a girl in our freshman class was outed as a non-virgin, and she ended up with a nickname that even I had found too awful to repeat. The seniors and juniors that got outed usually weren't looked down upon because by then most of the school had already lost it. But an incoming sophomore? Especially one who wasn't dating an upperclassman in the school? That was scandalous around here. How could Lindsey do this to me? This was way worse than what I had done to her. Way, way, way worse.

"Are you okay?" Danielle asked. She looked concerned as she put her hand on my shoulder.

What was I going to do? How was I going to go back out there and deal with the girls giving me dirty looks and the boys making jokes? I had never been a social outcast. I had never had to deal with people not liking me, nor looking down upon me. I didn't know what I was supposed to do.

"Nelli? Say something."

But then I thought about all the auditions I had been on. I thought about the dirty looks I would get by the other girls when I got a part, or how I myself felt when I didn't get a part. Then I thought about Ms. Rosa and everything she had told me, and I realized that this was my first real test of maturity. This was the first time that I would see what I would decide, and what I would do for myself and only for myself. Mami couldn't help me out of this one, and Papi couldn't make it go away, and Trace couldn't just pull me out of the situation so I wouldn't get hurt. The damage had been done, and it was all up to me. Now I had to decide what I was going to do.

"Nelli," Danielle said again. She waved her hand in front of my face. She sounded distressed, but not nearly as distressed as I felt.

So I was the new school slut? Okay. Boys were something I knew how to handle, and girls I usually ignored anyway. I could do this. Let Lindsey take my spot. She still would never be me, and that's all she really wanted anyway. I blinked my eyes and looked at Danielle.

"I'm fine," I said. "Thanks for telling me."

She looked spooked. "Are you sure?"

"I'm very sure. You're a good friend, Dani," I said. I gave her a quick hug and then left the bathroom.

I walked back to my locker to finish organizing, and then grabbed my things and hurried to my first period class. John was there and he saw me walk in then looked away. How weird that the news made all the boys

suddenly want to talk to me, and him not want to talk to me at all. Then again, I had been hoping that he would be turned off by me after finding out. Still, I hadn't expected him to actually react that way.

I sat toward the front and then prepared myself for the looks and comments, and when they didn't come, I figured that Dani had underestimated the student population of our school. Then the bell rang and the boy sitting beside me leaned over to me. "Hey, you wanna hang out sometime?"

It was weird how at that moment, I felt that many of the eyes in the classroom were on me. The girls in front of me stopped talking to turn around and hear my answer. The boys that were this boy's friends, and had probably egged him on to do it, were watching as they snickered. And even though John didn't turn around, he had stopped writing in his notebook and was listening for the answer as well.

I smiled at the boy, which got his hopes up, and then coyly and sweetly said, "Aww, I totally would've, but I don't think my boyfriend would like that very much. That was so nice of you to ask though."

"Oh," the boy said looking unsure, "you have a boyfriend?"

"Who are you dating?" the girl behind me asked.

I bit my lip and looked annoying, like a girl who was so in love she couldn't contain her excitement. "Well I wasn't going to tell anyone," I said as if I was confiding in her. I didn't really know the girl, but I've found that if you pretend to like people, they tend to like you back. "But it looks like my secret's out. His name is Diego. I met him over the summer and he's like...my everything. Do you wanna see him?"

The girl nodded, and I opened my folder and pulled out a picture of me and Diego. Danielle had taken it for us on one of our double date beach outings. The picture was my secret weapon, and it had the desired effect.

"Oh wow, he is hot," the girl said. She stared at the picture where Diego, shirtless, had his arms around me as I sat on his lap.

"Let me see," one of the girls in front of me said, and the picture was passed.

Before long, all the girls were jealous of me again, and all the boys were disappointed that they wouldn't be able to get with me. Well maybe not all the girls and boys, but at least enough to replace the old rumor with the new rumor that I was dating an older, hot, public school guy. After seeing his picture, they couldn't blame me for being seduced. It looked like Lindsey was going to have to find a new way to usurp me.

Diego

I wasn't expecting Nikki to be in my art class. I thought she would've found her way out of it and transferred to another class by now. I wondered why she didn't. She was sitting by herself at a table and reading a book. I sat beside her because it made sense and because I didn't want to sit beside anyone else. Then Elvis came into class and sat beside me, and I smiled at him because I definitely figured he would have switched his schedule. He shrugged in return and opened his backpack.

I looked at Nikki and back at Elvis and back at Nikki and then addressed both of them. "I thought you guys would've switched to another class."

"Why?" Nikki said, not looking up from her book. "It's an easy A. I have a hard schedule so I need one class that I don't have to worry about."

"What she said," Elvis agreed.

It made sense, but I didn't think it was the real reason. Still, I didn't say anything else until after our teacher gave us our first assignment for class. She had placed small potted plants on each of the tables and we were to draw them focusing on negative space. I began immediately, concentrating on the outline of the plant and trying to use some of the advice and techniques that Mario had shown me.

"So does Nelli do your shopping now?" Nikki asked me. Her question jarred me out of the creative zone I was in.

"What?"

"That outfit is very new."

"And very clean," Elvis pointed out.

"And very expensive," Nikki finalized.

Would she have asked if she didn't want to know the truth? "She picked it out. She thought I'd look good wearing this."

"You didn't look good before?" Nikki asked.

"She's got good taste," Elvis said assessing my outfit.

"I don't think she thought I didn't look good," I answered after I gave Elvis a weird look. "She just thought the outfit would look good on me."

"It's not very you," Nikki said.

"It kind of is," Elvis said. Nikki threw him a look but Elvis gave her a look back that said she needed to calm down.

"I like your outfit," I told Nikki. She smiled until I said, "I guess your boyfriend likes you in jeans." She narrowed her eyes and Elvis gave her a

look that told her that that's what she got for being difficult about my clothes in the first place.

We all returned to drawing the plant and I tried to get back in my zone, but had difficulty in finding it again. I looked over at Nikki's drawing to see that it was very linear and she was missing the point. I looked over at Elvis' to see that his plant was taking on an alien shape all its own. I could think of a million other classes they both would rather have been in.

"I'm sorry," I said to Nikki. "I didn't mean to be a jerk just now. You do look really great, and I'm really glad that you're both in class with me because I've missed you guys."

"Good," Nikki said looking at me, "because we've missed you too."

"Yes we have," Elvis agreed. "Monopoly just isn't the same with only two people."

"I bet it's not," I said. "We'll have to find a time when we can play again."

"Yeah," Nikki said. But she knew, and I knew, and even Elvis knew, that time would be hard to find. She'd have plans with Eric. I'd have plans with Nelli. Elvis wouldn't be able to make it anyway unless it was at Nikki's house. But still, it was nice to know that it was something we all did want to do.

24: A YEAR AGO TODAY

Nelli

I woke up on my sixteenth birthday to a room full of balloons and a big box at the foot of my bed. I totally knew what it was. I threw my comforter off me and knelt before the big box, giddy and excited, as I pulled off the large silver bow and ripped off the white wrapping. I opened the big box and inside there was more tissue paper than humanly possible. I stuck my hand all the way to the bottom, and with my fingertips found the cool, small, metal object. I pulled out the key and screamed. I ran to Papi and jumped on him as he walked in the door. He laughed and hugged me tight then gave me a kiss on the cheek.

“I have the camera, so let’s get this over and done with so I can go to work,” he said.

I had my flip flops on in two seconds. I bounced down the stairs with excitement. Mami was already in the foyer, drinking coffee, and looking too sleepy to care about the moment.

Papi opened the door and I ran out and found my cute, little, silver, two-door, sporty Mercedes in the driveway. I screamed again and ran over to it, touching it, admiring it, not believing that this was my car. This beautiful, pretty, little girl was mine, and now I didn’t have to waste time having to wait for a taxi in order to get to Diego. I couldn’t wait to show him the car.

I opened the door and sat in it. I rubbed my hands over the soft and expensive leather. I turned on the radio to admire the sound system. I opened and closed the sun roof several times.

“So you like it?” Papi asked.

I was incapable of speaking so I screeched again and got out of the car to give him another hug.

Nikki

I had made the decision in May to not run for class president. Sometimes when I got really maudlin about things, I wondered if that decision was a catalyst for where Diego and I ended up. Had he been helping me campaign and make flyers, we would've had to have spent more time together and away from Nelli. The reason that I hadn't gone for it, as I explained to Mrs. McCloud in the guidance office where I was once again seated for our one-on-one meeting, was because at the end of the day, I had no desire to be the class president. It wasn't even remotely interesting to me, and if the Ivies wanted class presidents, then maybe the Ivies weren't for me.

“Not to mention,” I said to the lady who was slowly starting to understand me, “I don't think I would want to leave Miami. My mom doesn't have anyone else here, and I don't really want to leave her, and I know you may not agree with that, but it's how I feel about it. I know my mom doesn't need me, but there's no reason I should really go anywhere else just to get an education when I can get an education here and still hang out with her.”

“I do agree,” Mrs. McCloud said. “I agree that when it comes to your education, you should do what's right for you. If you went away and spent the whole time stressing about your mother then you wouldn't be very productive. We're lucky to live in an area that has some great universities, but which one you should go to depends on what you want to major in and what kind of college experience you're looking for. Do you have any idea what that might be?”

I shook my head. I bet all the other kids in school that had this conversation with her knew exactly what they wanted to be. Eric wanted to be a professional soccer player, so he was focused on going to a college with a great soccer program where he could major in education and win championships. Elvis wasn't looking to go to college at all. After graduation, he was headed to L.A. with his mom in hopes of scoring a record deal. Diego definitely wasn't going to college. He could barely make it through high school. He would just make a living off his artwork, I supposed. But what did I want to do?

“What do you like to do?” Mrs. McCloud asked as she looked through my file. “You excel in all your classes. Which ones come easiest to you?”

None of them came easy. I worked hard on my papers, and on my research for history, and spent lots of hours making sure my math and science homework were done perfectly. I guess she was asking which one of these I didn’t mind as much, or maybe enjoyed.

“I like doing math,” I told her. “I like that the equations have a logical solution. There’s no interpreting the answer, it’s either wrong or right. But then I like science because that’s where you get creative with your logic. You come up with theories, and you apply laws of science to work out your theories, and you get...magic. Like, I don’t know how to explain it.” I felt kind of stupid saying that, but science seemed like magic to me. “I don’t care much for English because it’s so subjective. You can write a paper and give it to two different teachers and get two different grades. That doesn’t make sense to me. And history is okay, but they never spend enough time on the good history. They make you learn too much about the history that isn’t as interesting.”

Mrs. McCloud was in motion. She took out small pamphlets and sheets of paper with websites on them and handed them all to me. She had a very excited look on her face and I looked down at each paper she gave me with information on careers in math, science, and engineering. “Just look through these things,” she said. “Go to the websites, look into your options. I’m willing to bet something will catch your attention. In the meantime, why don’t you join the math and science clubs on campus so that you can get those on your college application? And those clubs do a lot of community service so you’ll get your required volunteer hours.”

I promised Mrs. McCloud that I would do just that, and I left her office feeling inspired. Could I really have a career in math or science? Then I thought about my parents. My mom was a nurse, my dad was a mechanic, and both of those required lots of math and science if I really thought about it. How had I never come to this conclusion on my own?

Diego

I was required to wear all white because for Nelli’s sixteenth birthday party her mom had decided that there needed to be a white party at the house. I felt like a dork in my white suit, but Nelli assured me that I looked good. She

gave me a kiss to calm my nerves. Nelli looked like a goddess in her long, white gown that had tiny silver beaded straps. She had a simple diamond drop necklace and small diamond stud earrings on as her only jewelry. Her wavy black hair was in an updo accented by a small tiara.

Nelli had wanted something small, and to her mother that meant inviting half the number of people she normally would. Loud music played as Nelli's classmates and family members chatted and danced around the living room. There were white and silver balloons everywhere. White streamers hung from the ceiling and walls.

In the dining room, the three tiered white cake was set up with silver stars and hearts all around it and sixteen candles right on top. Her presents were wrapped in white with silver bows, and all were at a table in the corner. The presents that had been brought for her by her friends and family were in the opposite corner in various colors and clashing with the décor for the evening. I swore that I could see Nelli's mom twitch every time she had to walk by them.

I tried to stay by Nelli's side as much as possible, but she was constantly running away to show someone her car, or to gossip with one of her friends away from everyone's ears, or to entertain one of her many guests. Since Ezra and Danielle were the only people I had really hung out with, I stayed by them, but it got tiring to listen to them argue and make-up over and over. They weren't nearly as comfortable to hang around with as Nikki and Elvis were. I decided to get more soda so that I could get away from them. I walked through the house as people smiled at me or just took a second look in my direction. I wondered what exactly Nelli told people about me.

Nelli's dad saw me and walked over to me just as I was pouring my soda.

"Diego," he said. I put down the bottle so that I didn't spill soda all over the place while he spoke to me. "Nelli thinks that I should take you out on the boat the next time I go fishing. You interested in that?"

The first time I ever went fishing was on the island with Nelli and Nikki. I had done pretty well on my first try. However, if he was asking, it probably wasn't smart to say no. "Yeah, that sounds like it could be fun."

"It's always fun. Maybe you'll bring us good luck and I'll actually catch something this time."

"I hope so, sir."

He looked at me funny when I called him sir and then he drank whatever he was drinking, which I'm pretty sure wasn't soda. He looked out at his house currently overrun by teenagers. We both spotted Nelli at the same

time, being twirled by some boy while she laughed. Then we watched as she flirted with another boy whose eyes were only on her.

“Guys like us are cursed with beautiful daughters,” her father said to me. He tossed back the rest of his drink. He then walked away and went up to his daughter whose attention quickly shifted only to him. She wrapped her arms around her dad’s waist and gave him the kind of hug that indicated she needed his safety at that moment. He was good about sensing it as he rubbed her back, and for that moment, even amidst all of the events going on around her, she was safe and felt a moment of peace.

I picked up the soda again and finished pouring myself a full cup. As I drank my soda, I looked at all the privileged kids that were in the house. They were from a completely different world than me and Nikki and Elvis. What exactly was I doing there? It didn’t matter how much Nelli dressed me up in expensive clothes, or Nelli’s mom introduced me to artists, I still felt like a fish out of water.

I watched as Nelli danced around with some girls and I suddenly felt inspired to draw her and the girls, like three maidens prancing around a forbidden garden. I stood there wishing there was a way to bring Nelli more into my world and leave her world behind completely. I also wished that she and I could hang out together with Nikki and Elvis. Like how we did before things went wrong. Things just didn’t seem right as they were, and I wondered if I could ever get them exactly how I wanted.

Nikki

I knew that today was Nelli’s birthday, and I hated that I knew it. A year ago today she had wormed her way into our lives. It was a year ago that Diego had become fixated on her and I began to lose some of the confidence I had always possessed.

My mom came home from work and I excitedly dragged her to the dining room where I surprised her with spaghetti that I had made from a recipe I had found online.

“I figured I’d be okay if I stayed away from the chicken,” I explained to her. She gave me a big hug and told me it looked great then went to get changed out of her uniform into something more comfortable.

I set up the table really nice and made her plate for her, sitting down just as she came back in.

“This smells amazing,” she said. She sat down and dug in. I knew she was hungry and exhausted. She normally was after a long shift. “You should’ve invited Eric and Elvis.”

“I thought it’d be nice if it was just the two of us, but I saved them some and I’ll give it to them tomorrow.”

“They’re going to love it. This tastes so good. I wonder where you got your cooking skills from.”

I laughed, but it was the perfect segue into what I wanted to talk to her about.

“All I did was follow the steps and the solution came out just as the recipe said it would. I like following steps, which is why I think I know what I want to do with my future.”

“You want to be a chef?”

I shook my head.

“I don’t know exactly, but I’ve been looking at websites and I think I want to do something like engineering. It looks really interesting.”

I didn’t know how to describe the way my mom looked at me at that moment. Proud was too subtle. She loved my answer. She loved that my logical brain had led me to this logical choice of career. Mostly she loved that she got stuck with me as a kid.

“I think you would be great at engineering. Do you know what type of engineering?”

“No, I’m still doing research on that. I’m joining the math and science clubs at school though so those might help me figure it out too.”

“You’re amazing.”

“Me? Mom, this is all because of you. You’re the most amazing mom ever. I don’t know how you do it.” Here I was praising my mom and all my mind could do was drift to Diego’s mom. Had he even seen her lately? Why couldn’t he have had an awesome mom too? His mom sucked. Strangely, I remembered a time when I didn’t think that, but I guess I was too young to see it then. If my mom and his mom were in a head-to-head competition for mom of the year, my mom would win by taking 100% of the votes.

“You always find a way to do what you have to do,” she said as she watched me. “What’s on your mind?”

“I was just wondering when the last time Diego talked to his mom was. I don’t think he’s seen her in a while.”

“What?” my mom asked horrified. “What do you mean he hasn’t seen her?”

I probably shouldn't have said anything. "I don't mean, I mean, you know, I'll ask him at school on Monday. I'm probably making that up."

"So are the two of you friends again?"

"We're working on it. We only see each other in art class." I fell silent and started playing with my spaghetti. What I didn't want to say was that the class I most looked forward to going to now was art for this very reason. My mom didn't say anything either, which was nice of her, so I offered her my thoughts. "The thing is. I really missed him. And when I hang out with him, for that moment, I can forget that we ever stopped being friends. But then days like this happen." My mom looked for clarification. "Today is Nelli's birthday, and it was a year ago that he met her, and I know he's with her now, and it drives me crazy."

"It's hard to get over your first love," my mom tried.

"But it's been six months. I should be more than over him by now. It didn't take him long to get over me."

"How do you know that?"

"Duh, he's with Nelli. The girl of his dreams. The girl he couldn't stop painting or drawing or staring at. He was just waiting..." I stopped myself. I had moved past this and I didn't know why it was all surfacing again now. I blamed it on the fact that it was Nelli's birthday. "I hate today."

"You're allowed to hate today. But you better not hate tomorrow. You understand me?"

I nodded and excused myself from the table. I went to my room where I lay on my bed and hugged my pillow close. My mom was right. It was okay to give myself a day, but it could only be a day. Maybe this is what my mom did too. Maybe on the days that she didn't say much and stayed in her room for the whole day, it was because she was thinking about my dad. Sometimes I felt bad for my mom, but she always made it work, and if she could make it work, then I had no excuse.

So I got up from my bed and went to my laptop and sent an instant message to Elvis asking if he was up for some spaghetti. He was over in ten minutes.

Nelli

I sat in my new car ready to have the private party I had been waiting to have all day since I had woken up.

“I don’t think I’m ever going to stop driving her,” I said as my hands circled the steering wheel. “I think I’m going to just drive until I can’t drive anymore and see where I end up.”

“That sounds like a great idea,” Diego said as he watched me. We were still in our white garments, but he had lost his tie and jacket at some point. I loved how he looked, and I leaned over to kiss him. He kissed me back in that way that I had become accustomed to and a small butterfly in my stomach ruffled its wings as I thought about how he was the first person that I ever kissed in my car. When we pulled away, I looked into his eyes and moved my fingers through his hair.

“Do you remember last year, when you first saw me?”

“I can’t forget it.”

That made me smile. “Do you still think of me in that way? In that perfect painting way? Or am I now less than that to you?”

“You’re more,” he said. He took my hand and kissed it, then leaned into me again to give me a lingering kiss that made my stomach flip again. “You’re the first thing I think of when I wake up and the last thing I think of when I go to sleep.”

“That sounds like an obsession,” I said. I lifted my chin as he kissed down the side of my face and to my neck.

“It is an obsession,” he said. I wanted so badly to be in my bed with him instead of in the small car which suddenly wasn’t big enough for where this was headed.

Then I heard a knock on the car door and we both jumped and sat back in our seats. I was completely still, my heart racing in panic. I rolled down the window and was relieved that it was the maid and not my parents. She said that they were looking for me, and I told her I’d be right in. I rolled the window back up and put my hand on my heart as I let out a pent up breath. Diego did the same. We busted out laughing so hard that we could barely breathe.

25: A BIG CONFESSION

Diego

Mrs. McCloud had a lot on her mind as she looked through my file. My leg bounced up and down, and I hoped she wouldn't take a long time in telling me that I had to stop being late to school. Then someone knocked on Mrs. McCloud's door. The door opened and one of the school secretaries announced that my mother had arrived. I froze in my seat.

"Come in, sit down," Mrs. McCloud said to her as she walked in. "I know it was difficult for you to get away from work, so we'll try and make this as quick as possible."

My mom sat down beside me. I looked at her wondering what she was doing there. She looked at me with the upset look that let me know that she'd be dealing with me later.

"What seems to be the issue?" my mom asked the guidance counselor. I wanted to know as well.

"At the rate that Diego is going, he will more than likely fail the first three classes of this semester," Mrs. McCloud informed her. My mom glared at me hard.

"What?"

"It appears that Diego doesn't like to show up to school until fourth period."

"I've always done that," I said to Mrs. McCloud. "I never failed before."

"You've always done that?" my mom asked me. I sank a little in my chair.

“Diego has a lot of work that needs to be made up,” Mrs. McCloud continued. “His teachers are giving him this chance even though they normally wouldn’t accept late work like this. In addition to these three classes, he’s not doing well in the rest of his classes and has already had eight unexcused absences this semester. If he gets a few more of those then we’ll have no choice but to expel him for truancy.”

My mom gave me the worst look I had ever seen on her face; disbelief, disappointment, disapproval, dissatisfaction, distaste with me.

“How could you let this happen?” she asked me. I didn’t answer. “I trusted you. I thought I could count on you to at least go to school on time. Did you think you would get away with this?”

I should’ve said something like “No ma’am” or “I’m sorry,” but instead I said, “I didn’t think you’d care.” Now I knew I was in for it.

Mrs. McCloud was very unsure of what to do at this moment, but my mom didn’t hold back.

“You didn’t think I’d care?” Her voice rose. “This is how you repay me for giving you independence and trusting that you were mature enough to handle a studio and being home alone? If I had known you still wanted to be treated like a little kid then I would’ve. Maybe that’s what I need to do. I guess I’ll walk with you every morning and make sure you get on the bus. Do you want me to hold your hand too?”

This entire conversation was not good. In a way, yes, I would’ve liked her to have been home, whether it be morning or night. No, of course I wouldn’t want her to hold my hand and walk me to the bus. But yes, I would have liked for her to remember that I still needed her.

“Don’t you have anything to say for yourself?” I still didn’t answer. My mom looked at Mrs. McCloud. “I will take care of this. He will do all of his make-up work and I’ll make sure he gets on that bus every morning.”

“We just don’t want to see any of our students fail,” Mrs. McCloud said. She sounded unsure of what was going to happen once we left her office.

“Oh he’s not going to fail,” my mother said. “Let’s go.”

Go where? “I have to get back to class,” I said. My mom glared at me again.

“We’re getting your school work, and then we’re going to your studio to get your things and turning that key back in, and then you’re going home and getting started on your work. This ends right now.”

Then I snapped. I got to my feet and started yelling at my mother in a way I had never yelled at her before.

“You think this is going to solve anything? I don’t care if you get rid of my studio because I’m getting a bigger one anyway. And you can’t make me do my work or come here or anything, because tomorrow you may try and play the part of my mom, but the next day you’ll be gone again and I won’t hear from you for another three months. So why don’t you stop pretending that you still care about me and just leave me alone.”

“Leave you alone? We see how well that worked out.”

“And we see how well your parenting worked out didn’t we?” I smarted back. This compelled my mother to raise her hand and smack me across the face. Mrs. McCloud gasped and my eyes hardened as I looked at my mother in defiance. She was so angry. I wondered whatever really did happen to my mother. Where had she gone? And who was this stand-in that she had sent in her place?

“I must ask you to leave at once before I call security,” Mrs. McCloud said to her.

My mother gave me one last good glare. “I will pick you up as soon as school is over,” she said. Then she left the office.

Now it was just me and Mrs. McCloud again. The woman looked at me with a guilty expression. Then she bent over her desk as she wrote something on a notepad. When she was done she handed me the note.

“Why don’t you go to the infirmary for the rest of this period? They can give you some ice and you can lie down and relax a bit.”

I took the note from her hand and looked at her.

“You’re not going to report my mom are you?”

“I can if necessary. Does this sort of thing happen often?”

“How can it? She’s never around.”

“I can report that as well. It sounds as you’ve been abandoned.”

I shook my head and tried to think of a way to get her to understand.

“I was an accident. My mom didn’t really know my dad. I’ve never even met him.” Mrs. McCloud listened to me carefully and with understanding eyes. “But, I look like him. I know that because I don’t look a lot like her. Also because the way she looks at me sometimes. It’s like she’s looking at him. Hating him.”

“This isn’t your fault,” Mrs. McCloud said.

“She used to really care about me. But then she met this guy and it’s like she took all of her love and gave it to him instead. I think now she just wants me to disappear.”

“Have you told her how you feel?”

“She doesn’t want to hear it. I don’t even want to be here,” I confessed to her. “I hate coming here. It’s boring and I don’t want to do the work.”

“What is it that you want to do?”

I wanted to go back to Nelli’s island and play in the water and paint the sunset and eat fresh fish and run naked through the palm trees and play with the fishes that swam among the mangrove trees.

“I think I just want to lie down.”

I left Mrs. McCloud’s office and went to the infirmary.

Nikki

Diego’s cheek was bright red with the shape of a hand mark imprinted on his skin. “Are you okay?” I asked him. My eyes must’ve been so wide, but who the heck had smacked him?

“I’m fine,” he mumbled. He tuned me out and started working on his painting.

Elvis came in and saw the mark and started to ask, but I motioned for him to sit down and be quiet. We focused on our paintings, but since my eyes kept wandering to Diego, my painting wasn’t really getting done. When the bell rang, I followed him to his next class and stood in front of him so that he couldn’t go in.

“Talk to me,” I said.

Diego kept his eyes on the floor and I had no choice but to move and let him in to class.

“Maybe it was Eric?” Elvis suggested as we walked to our own class.

“Why would Eric slap him?” I asked.

That would make no sense. If Diego gave him any provocation, then I’m sure Eric would full on punch him. I sat down in class but couldn’t concentrate on a single thing. So I sent him a text message and hoped that he would send one back. He didn’t.

As soon as the bell rang, I rushed out of my seat. I got to Diego’s classroom in time to see him walk out. I walked beside him. I couldn’t say anything because we were walking so fast. When he stopped at his locker, I could finally speak to him.

“What happened?” I asked him again. “Let me help you if something’s wrong.”

He slammed his locker shut and looked at me. Then he looked past me.

“Your fan club’s waiting for you.” He turned and left.

I looked behind me to see Elvis and Eric watching me. I knew that I would probably regret this later, but I ignored the two E’s and hurried in the direction that Diego had left. I spotted him by the pick-up area. I stood beside him again, this time demanding that he speak to me.

“What is wrong with you? Why won’t you tell me who hit you? I’m your friend, Diego. Did you forget that?”

“It’s nothing,” he said to me. Then his mom pulled up, and Diego got into the car and disappeared.

Okay, that was really weird. Diego’s mom never picked him up from school. What was going on? I watched the car leave and felt the two E’s beside me.

“What’s going on?” Eric asked.

“I wish I knew,” I said.

“Why did his mom pick him up?” Elvis asked.

“I wish I knew that too.” I closed my eyes and felt the urge to let out a big scream. Something was very wrong.

I walked with the boys to Eric’s car and got in. I couldn’t bring up a lively debate like I normally would, or sing along to the radio all loud and obnoxious in that way that made Elvis shudder. All I could do was hope that Diego sent me a text message with an explanation. But it never came.

Nelli

“I can’t believe you made it here in one piece,” Trace said. I pouted but he gave me a really big hug that made me forget how offended I was. “How are you liking your ride?”

“It’s my favorite thing in the world,” I told him. I wanted to jump up and down again like I did when I first got it. “It goes so fast.”

“Uh, when you say that you mean hypothetically right?”

“Of course,” I said coyly. I waved to his wife who came out of one of the other rooms.

“How are you, Nelli? Just got out of dance I see?”

“Yeah,” I told her and I let her know I was fine as well. We exchanged all the appropriate pleasantries before I followed Trace to his office. Usually he disappeared in there alone, but he said he had official business to discuss with me. I thought it was so adorable that he was giving me the professional

treatment. I sat down across from him and smiled at the picture of us that he kept on his desk. I couldn't believe how young I looked in the picture even though it had only been taken a couple of years ago.

"So, do you remember our new protégé, Luc?"

How could I forget him? The boy was fine to look at and very talented.

"Yeah, what about him?"

"We're almost done with his album. We picked a single for him and started putting it out there, you know, just to see how it would do in the market. Well as it turns out, it did better than anticipated. We had to formally release it and now we've got to get a video together to throw on BET before the hype dies down."

"That makes sense," I told him.

I had no idea why he was telling me this. Papi and Trace never talked to me about the logistics of the company. They only consulted me when they wanted to see if something they were putting out would appeal to someone like me. Maybe he wanted to show me the video to see if it was something that my demographic would like.

"So we sat around and got some video treatments from top name directors, and we all agreed on the one that would be perfect. It's a classic Miami video. Luc will be driving a nice ride into South Beach, the skyline and water in the back. There would be a club scene, where we see him on the mic. Then a yacht scene, the whole nine."

"That doesn't sound original," I said. "All Miami videos look like that."

"I know. Classic. It's a good way to introduce him to the scene, make people see that he's the real deal. He knows how to play the game. It's all about playing the game."

"Okay." I could go along with this. "So do I get to see it?"

"We haven't shot it yet."

Now I was really confused as to why I was there. "Okay," I said again.

"In the video there's a girl that's Luc's girl. She's in all the scenes, the club, the yacht, so on. The song's about wanting the unattainable girl. So he's rhyming to her in all the scenes, trying to get her attention, but she's not really responding. Until the end when his car gets to its final destination, and we pan to the side to see that the girl is a mannequin. She was never real to begin with."

Now it made sense. He wanted my opinion on the treatment. "It sounds kind of interesting. I mean, it's good that it has a twist."

"Luc wants you to be the girl."

That was the last thing I had expected him to say. That's what this was all about?

"What?"

"When we started talking about casting for the lead girl, Luc said he knew who it had to be. He said it had to be you since you inspired the song."

I could only imagine what Papi's face was like during that meeting. It took some serious balls for Luc to admit this in front of both Papi and Trace. Suddenly he was that much hotter.

"Be in a video? Me? I couldn't be in a video."

"So says the girl selling gum to teens during their favorite shows."

"That's different. I just had to dance out of a classroom."

"This would be less work. You would just pose a lot."

"Papi's okay with this?"

Trace let out a small chuckle. "Of course he's not. But he said the choice was yours."

"Does Mami know?"

"Are you kidding? She's already looking over your contract."

This was probably what Mami had been waiting for since the day she had me. This could be the big break that would put me out there for the whole world to see. In her mind this was exactly the kind of thing that would lead me to television shows and finally to the big prize—full length features. How could I say no after everything Mami had worked so hard for?

"I'll do it," I said.

"Are you sure?" Trace asked. "This is your decision. Do you really want to do it?"

"Yeah," I said, "I do."

"Alright, welcome to the project," he said extending his hand to me. I shook it and felt pretty good about my decision because I knew Mami was going to be so happy. "You should stick around for a while if you can. I can play you the rest of the songs we have done for Luc unless you have big plans, of course." He reached into his bottom drawer and pulled out two crisp hundred dollar bills and gave them to me. He always gave me money when I came to visit, but always told me not to tell my parents that he was giving me more shopping money. "That should help you with gas," he said with a wink.

I laughed and took the money. I got up to give him a big, thankful hug. "I could stay. I had big plans but they got cancelled."

"What happened?"

"I'm not sure. Diego sent me a text saying he couldn't hang out tonight. I'll have to call him later to see what's going on."

"How are things between the two of you? The boy looked scared at your birthday."

"They're good," I said with a grin that probably looked really cheesy to him. "He doesn't know anyone at my school so he was a little shy."

"Your mom says he's a good little artist."

"He's amazing. He can draw and paint anything. He drew the island and made it look so realistic. And his sunset is like looking at a real sunset."

"You should bring him by sometime," Trace said. "We could use a creative person's opinion on things. We'll make a night of it. Pop some popcorn, listen to music, play some video games. How about it?"

"I love that idea. Maybe we could do it the night after you guys go fishing."

"Oh yes," Trace said as he swiveled in his chair. "The fishing trip. I forgot you conned your dad into bringing Diego along."

I laughed and grabbed his hand. "Come on. I want to hear Luc's songs."

"Yeah yeah," he said knowing that I was purposely changing the subject. I always tended to get my way with Trace so he followed along and we went to go listen to the song that I would be posing for.

Diego

We hadn't gone to the studio after my mom had picked me up. She had taken me straight home and marched straight to her room to call Chris. Maybe she had wanted his advice on how to save her from this mess. I had gone straight to my room with all the work that I was supposed to make up. I looked at it as if it was an impossible task in front of me. The reason that I didn't have this problem last year was because Nikki was so good about reminding me to get my assignment from someone in my class. She would always help me finish it so I could turn it in.

I had always known that I made it through school because of Nikki, but it never occurred to me until right now just what that meant. Nikki was the smartest person I knew. She could be a doctor and a lawyer if she wanted to. She could probably take over the computers of the world, or the banks, or all the countries if she really wanted to. And what could I do? Paint a sunset? Why had she put up with me to begin with?

What was I doing? Did I really think that I could keep living my life like this? Sliding by with my mom's handouts without consequence? Elvis was recording a demo, Nelli was in a gum commercial, Nikki worked at the bagel shop and saved up a lot of money, and what had I done all summer long? My mom was a hard worker and I wasn't. My mom did what she had to do to make sure we had a nice roof over our heads and food on the table. I couldn't even wake up to go to school every day and do the assignments that were given to me.

I was my father. I was the guy that got a girl pregnant and took off because I couldn't handle the responsibility. No wonder my mother couldn't stand to be around me. I was pretty sure that if she had known then that I would turn out just like him, she would've given me up for adoption and saved herself the hassle. So then the question became: Do I keep following in my father's footsteps and end up nowhere, or do I follow in my mother's footsteps and end up working a job I didn't want but that at least I could call mine? I looked down at the work on my bed and made my decision. I would follow neither. I would follow my own, learning from both of their mistakes.

I turned on my laptop and looked up my class syllabus for first period, then looked at the work given to me. I was immediately overwhelmed, but I kept my head together and forced myself to focus. I started working on the very first assignment. By the time I finally finished, my mother opened the door to my room and found me printing it out at my desk. I looked at her and felt so embarrassed.

"Come out to the den, please," she said and then she left.

I took a deep breath and took my time walking out to the den, looking bashful and guilty. She stood there with a cell phone in her hand as if she needed it for support. I appreciated Chris at that moment. He was someone that my mom knew she could rely on when things got bad. I was glad she had found someone like that.

"I'm really sorry for how I acted earlier," I said first. "I was out of line."

I don't think she was expecting an apology for me. I seemed to catch her off guard. She accepted the apology and rubbed her face with her hand.

"I know I haven't been the mother you've needed. You always seemed so independent that I thought you could take care of yourself. I didn't know."

"You didn't ask," I pointed out.

"No. I didn't. I didn't feel I needed to. That was my mistake."

"It's okay. I understand. You found someone that you could choose to love and you gave him all of your attention instead. I was just in the way."

“No,” she took a few steps toward me. “No, baby, that’s not what’s going on here. You’re my baby boy. You always will be.”

“You keep telling me that, and then you keep disappearing with some guy. And it’s obvious it’s because he makes you happy and I don’t. I remind you of all your mistakes. Your mistake with dad. Because I look like him, and you hate me for it.”

“No,” she said again. “Diego, there is nothing that could make me hate you. Nothing. Do you understand? It’s the other way around. The reason I haven’t introduced you to Chris is because I don’t want you to hate me.”

Now I was confused. “Why would I hate you?”

Tears pooled at her eyes again, but she found the strength to make her confession. “He’s married. I’ve been having an affair with a married man for four years.”

That didn’t make any sense. Moms didn’t have affairs. My mom wasn’t meant to be someone’s other woman. My mom was meant to be the only woman in someone’s life. This was crazier than all of the theories I had ever had about why she kept Chris a secret.

“I am so sorry,” she said as the tears flowed. “I know you must hate me and think so badly of me. I am so sorry that I’m not the person that I’m supposed to be for you.”

“I don’t understand,” I said because I really didn’t. I was still trying to wrap my head around it. “Why would you do that to yourself? Why would you spend so much time with someone who thinks of you as a number two, when you have someone here that needs you as his number one?”

“It’s not the same, baby. Someday you’ll understand. Someday you’ll need someone in your life to make you feel special. Not how you make me feel special for being your mother, but special, in a different way.”

I actually understood too well. “But...” I was still trying to understand it. The pieces would all click right? “Why do you spend all your time with him if he has a family? Wait, does he have a family? Does he have kids?”

“I don’t think you need to know all this.”

“I do need to know this. I need to understand.”

She didn’t want to tell me, but I stood my ground and she answered the questions. “We decided that we should have a place to meet, so I moved into a condo. It made things easier.”

“Does he pay for that condo?”

“Yes.”

“And what about his family?”

“He has two kids. A boy and a girl. The boy’s around your age. The girl’s in middle school.”

This was insane. I had been wrong this whole time. I wasn’t just like my father. I was just like my mother. Leaving the girl that always made sure I was okay, for a girl who was a fantasy and bought me new clothes? Was stupidity genetic? I sat on the arm of the sofa and looked at my mom who was wiping the tears from her face. We were quite a pair.

“Why would he buy me anything?” I asked her next. “Why did he get me the laptop and help pay for the studio?”

“Because I talk about you all the time,” she said smiling through her tears. “Because he knows that you mean everything to me. You have met him, you know. At a company picnic. You were in elementary school so you probably don’t remember. I have your pictures all over my office. He always comments on how much you’ve grown. I kept hoping he would leave his wife and that the three of us could start a new family, but he’s never going to.”

“If you know that, then why do you keep doing it?”

“Because I love him,” she let out a pathetic laugh. “Silly isn’t it? Falling in love with someone you can never really have? Someone who’s just a fantasy. Just a mirage.”

“It’s not that silly,” I said feeling self-conscious. “Do you ever feel bad? Like for his wife and kids?”

“I do. I try not to think about them.” She was able to control her emotions now. She sat on the armchair that was facing me. “Can we talk about you now?”

I shrugged and crossed my arms because it was my turn to get defensive.

“What’s going on with you and school?”

Where to start? There wasn’t enough time in the world for that one.

“It’s boring and I hate it.”

“But you have to graduate. I thought Nikki was helping you.”

“Nikki and I broke up over the summer.”

This shocked her. Part of the reason my mom probably rationalized leaving me alone all the time was because I had Nikki to take care of me.

“Why?”

Oh the irony. I thought of a million ways to tell my mom the story but in the end all I could say was, “I fell for a girl who was a fantasy.”

I told my mom about meeting Nelli at Vizcaya, and about how she hung out with us, and how she took us on her dad’s yacht, and then her dad’s

island, and how she started buying me clothes, and became my girlfriend, and liked to parade me around in front of her friends. My mom understood every single aspect of the story. When I finished, she got up and gave me a really tight hug, holding my head strongly against her stomach.

When she finally let me go, she held my shoulders and looked me in the eyes. “Are you at least happy?” The question wasn’t supposed to be funny, but it kinda was. She smiled, and I smiled with her.

“I don’t know. I think I am. You?”

“I don’t know,” she said. “I think I am.” She messed my hair up and sat back on the armchair. “So what are we going to do about you and school?”

“I’m going to get my work done. Nikki and I are working on being friends so I might ask her to help me.”

“I think that’s a great idea.”

“What are we going to do about you and your living situation?”

“I’m going to tell Chris that I’m going to spend a lot more nights here instead. He’ll understand.”

I appreciated that more than my mom could know. I gave her a huge hug and told her that I loved her before hiding back in my room to work on my assignments. Unfortunately, after suffering through one more English essay, I finally broke down and called Nikki.

“Hey,” she said, “are you okay?”

It was funny how I could visualize her worried expression.

“I am. I’m sorry about earlier today. I was called into the guidance office because I was close to failing and being expelled.”

Nikki freaked out on me, which made it that much easier to ask for her help. She of course said that she would be right over.

Nelli

I came home from Trace’s and expected to walk into a quiet house, but I could hear voices coming from upstairs. As I climbed the stairs to go to my room, the voices became louder. I sat at the top of the stairs and paid attention to what was going on.

“If you didn’t want her to do it then you could’ve said no,” Mami yelled.

“That’s not the point,” Papi yelled back. “The point is that you’re so intent on making her everything that you weren’t, that you don’t even stop to consider how she feels about any of it.”

“Trace called and said she wanted to do it.”

“You know she only wanted to do it because she knew it’s what you wanted.”

“I’m trying to look out for her best interests. What are you trying to do? You just spoil her. I make her actually work for what she wants.”

“For what *you* want.”

“At least my way helps her build character.”

“Do you hear yourself? Are you so delusional that you’ve bought into your own lies?” I could hear Papi shuffling in the room as if he was pacing. “Nelli’s a smart girl. She can do anything, be anything, and because of you she’s going to keep going out there and being just a piece of meat for people to use and manipulate. Didn’t you see her at that charity show? She looked like she was ready to pass out. And for what? So that you could brag about how you have a beautiful daughter.”

“It’s a shame you don’t see your own daughter’s potential.”

“I’m the one that sees her potential!”

“No. You see what you want to see. You don’t want to acknowledge that her biggest asset is how she looks. You’re afraid that she’s going to turn out to be just like me, and that kills you because you want her to be just like you.”

“I want her to be whoever she wants to be. You’re not allowing her to discover that.”

I heard Mami laugh, but not in a way that indicated that something was funny. “To be whoever she wants to be? So if she wanted to be a bum and do nothing all day you would be okay with that? I have actively made sure that she becomes somebody. What have you done for her?”

“The same thing I’ve done for you. I’ve provided everything so that the two of you can be happy. But you are never satisfied. I can’t deal with you tonight. I’m sleeping downstairs.”

I sprung up and hurried to my room. I closed the door just in time as I heard the master bedroom door swing open with an angry force. After getting ready for bed, I grabbed my cell phone, turned my light off, and then sent Diego another text. I fell asleep waiting for him to text me back.

Nikki

It was two in the morning when we finally finished all of Diego’s English and history homework. Now all that was left was science, and I promised him

that I'd help him with it tomorrow. He was so exhausted, and by the time I got my sweater on, he was passed out asleep in his bed. I fought every desire within me to crawl into the bed with him. Instead I moved the books from his bed onto his desk before bringing his comforter up so that it covered him. I set his alarm clock for him as promised, and took one last look at him sleeping before I turned the light off and left his room.

As I drove back home in my mom's car, I couldn't get the image of Diego sleeping out of my mind. I also couldn't stop thinking about what he had told me regarding his mother. He seemed to feel awful for her, but also confused. If my mom had made a confession like that to me, I think my world would've stopped functioning. I could only imagine how he felt.

When I finally got home, I crawled into bed and held my pillow close to me. I imagined Diego in his bed and pretended that my pillow was him instead.

26: NICE GUYS

Diego

Nelli stood on the dock and gave me another long kiss before fixing my polo shirt. “Don’t let them push you off,” she said. She waved good-bye to her dad and Trace before getting back into her mother’s car. The plan was for the boys to go fishing while the girls went shopping. Then we were all supposed to meet up at some restaurant where we would get lunch. Now I wasn’t so sure I’d survive that far into the day.

I stepped onto the yacht after Nelli’s dad and Trace, and tried to stay out of their way as they did whatever it was they were doing on the boat. Once we were out to sea, I pulled out my sketch pad and started drawing the sharp edges of the yacht from my vantage point. I blended in with the scenery as much as I could, but her dad found me anyway.

“Do you want a beer?” he asked me. He held out a can of beer to me. Was this a trick question?

“Sure,” I said. He smiled and handed it to me, so I guessed I had picked the right answer. I opened it and took a sip from it as he sat beside me. He looked at what I was drawing.

“Did you just draw that?”

“Yeah.”

“Just now?”

“Yeah.”

“No kidding. Trace, come look at this.”

Trace came over and looked at the drawing. “You just drew that?”

“Yeah,” I said again.

“That’s amazing,” Trace said. He grabbed a fishing pole to prepare it. “I think we found us a good spot. I’m going to get started on luring that big shark we saw the other day.”

Big shark? He was kidding right?

“You’ve definitely got talent,” her dad said as he got up as well. “So you want to be an artist?”

I put the sketch pad and pencil back in my backpack and stood up to grab a fishing pole as well.

“I think so,” I said. “I never thought art could be a career, but now I’m focusing on it so that it can be.”

“It’s good to have focus,” Trace said as he tossed his line out.

I made sure my line was tied correctly and reached into the bait box to put the small fish on the end. Then I stood on the other side of Nelli’s dad and tossed my line, watching it fall perfectly where I had anticipated it would. There wasn’t a single cloud in the sky so the water was the type of blue you see in commercials to entice people to come visit Miami. The cool, late November breeze was tempered by the strong sun rays to make it comfortable outside. I felt energized to be out there fishing.

“So did Nelli tell you about her music video?” her dad asked me.

“Yeah, it sounds pretty cool.”

“You watch BET?” Trace asked.

“Sometimes.”

“I bet you’ll watch it more now,” he observed. I told him he was probably right. It had been surreal when I had randomly caught her gum commercial on TV. A full length music video, though, would be insane. I actually couldn’t wait for it.

“When does she start filming?” I asked.

“Next week,” Trace answered. “Right out here. You know, we should let them use your yacht. Save us some money in the production costs.”

“Good thinking,” her dad said.

I felt a tug at my line and slowly began reeling in whatever had taken the bait. It struggled hard, and required a good effort on my part to get it out of the water. Once I did, a good sized silver-gray fish went flapping against the top of the water as it tried to pry itself free.

“Looks like a trout,” Trace said.

I was able to get it into the boat by myself, which was crazy considering this was only the second time I had ever been fishing. Nelli had been a pretty good teacher.

“I can’t believe you caught a fish,” Nelli’s dad said. “How many times do we go fishing?” he asked Trace.

“Like once a month,” Trace said.

“Have we ever caught anything?”

“Nope.”

They both looked at me like I had a secret, but I was clueless as to why this fish decided to eat my bait. We admired the trout and then Trace unhooked it and let me toss it back into the sea where the fish swam away from us as fast as he could. Well I assumed it was a he.

I felt that I had met my fishing quota already, so I spent the rest of the time drinking my beer and drawing Trace and Nelli’s dad as they fished. I felt completely relaxed being out there on the open water. The only thing that would have made it perfect was if instead of Trace and Nelli’s dad, it was Nikki and Nelli again. And Elvis too. And with a Monopoly board set up and ready to play on.

Nelli

Sometimes Miami was a very small place. Usually when I went shopping with Mami, I never really ran into anyone, but today, I ran into John while waiting in line at the coffee shop. He happened to be standing in front of me, and I didn’t want to be rude and not say anything so I tapped him on the shoulder.

He turned and looked like he wasn’t sure if he wanted to say hi to me. He still hadn’t said a word to me in school, and it hadn’t gone past my attention that he had not shown up to my birthday party either. That was a first in the history of John.

“Hey,” I said.

“Hey,” he said back.

“How are you?”

“Like you really care?”

Ouch. I cared enough to ask didn’t I?

“Okay,” I said, “I’m sorry I bothered you.”

“What game are you trying to play here, Nelli?” he asked. “What are you doing with Danielle? You know you don’t like her. You like Ezra even less.

What do you try and accomplish when you rotate your supposed friends? Why did you do what you did to Lindsey? And what do you get out of treating me like dirt when all I ever do is care about you?"

These were all really good questions, and I knew they were good questions because I had asked myself the same exact questions many times before.

"I don't know," I said. That was the most honest I had ever been with John.

"I hope you figure it out someday, Nelli, because one day you're going to try and get a friend back that you really want, and you'll find that they've moved on and won't give you the time of day."

"Is that what you've done?"

"I've done it as much as a guy who's been in love with you since kindergarten can do it." He turned back around and then ordered his coffee. I really wanted to say something to him that would be profound and make him understand, but I came up blank. I ordered my coffee next and then waited beside him as the barista made our orders.

"You weren't really in love with me," I finally said to him. "You thought I was cute or whatever, but it wasn't love."

"How would you know? You don't know the first thing about love."

"Yes I do. I know that if you really loved me, you wouldn't have tried to have sex with me while I was drunk on my fifteenth birthday. You were trying to take advantage of me, and it's something you've tried many times before. Maybe the reason I hold onto you guys is because I don't have any real friends, and maybe the reasons I rotate you so much is because then you can't take advantage of me since you don't know when you'll be in or out with me. So maybe this whole thing is self-preservation. And maybe it is best if you and Lindsey move on so none of us have to deal with each other again."

"Wow," John said as he grabbed his coffee, "you really are a bitch, Nelli. Have a nice life." He left. Instead of feeling guilty, I felt proud of the fact that I had stood up for myself.

The barista handed me my coffee and I thanked her. As I walked back to the store where I had left Mami, I thought about who the ideal friend would be. It would be someone who didn't always agree with me just for the sake of agreeing with me, and it would be someone who didn't always argue with me just for the sake of arguing. It would be someone who shared the same interests as me, like shopping and going to the beach, but someone who was

different enough that they introduced me to things that I didn't normally do, like playing Monopoly and doing somersaults in the pool.

I stopped walking and stared into a window display of a store that both Nikki and I loved. I looked at one of the outfits on the mannequin and could literally hear Nikki's commentary on it and how much she would love it. I suddenly felt upset, but I wasn't sure why. I walked away from the store.

I took a sip of my coffee drink and focused on my schedule for the day because I didn't want to think about what it meant that I was mentally asking myself the following question: If I had realized then that Nikki was the friend that I had always wanted, would I have ruined the chance of a friendship with her by stealing Diego? I wanted the answer to be no, but I knew myself better than that.

Nikki

I was in my bedroom, staring at Elvis, and waiting for him to answer my question. He ate another jelly bean and I was very close to throwing my furry pillow at him.

"It's a tough call," he finally said.

I threw it.

"Hey," he said as he caught it. He pretended to throw it back but then kept it. "What do you want me to tell you? I can't tell you to break up with Eric, but I can't tell you to stay with him either. You're the one who holds hands with him. Not me."

"See the fact that we can't go past hand holding says something. It's been three months. I still shouldn't be substituting hugs for kisses."

"I'm really surprised he hasn't broken up with you yet."

I closed my eyes very tightly, seeing how much I could pressure them permanently shut. This oddly felt good. I opened my eyes and again looked at Elvis for help.

"Eric is the sweetest guy on the planet. I really think he would wait until I came to my senses."

"Let's say hypothetically that you break up with Eric. Then what? Would you try and get Diego back?"

"No," I said. I would never do to anyone what Nelli had done to me. But then again, what exactly did Nelli do to me? Was it really her fault that Diego had been attracted to her?

“So then what?” Elvis asked.

I had no idea.

“I guess I just wouldn’t feel guilty about having the thoughts that I do about Diego.”

“So it really comes down to Diego still keeping you from moving on,” Elvis stated.

I didn’t like that observation and I snatched my pillow away from him and held it close to my chest. I watched over the top of the pillow as Elvis ate his jelly beans in silence. This just wasn’t fair. But even as I sat there, the only thing in my mind was Diego in art class, Diego sleeping, Diego working so hard to get his papers done, Diego sitting in lunch and adding the finishing touches to his assignment, for that matter, Diego and his new intensity for art. I don’t know how it was possible, but he had gotten better at it. I let out a frustrated shriek and got up from my bed tossing the pillow back onto Elvis.

“What are you doing?” Elvis asked as I grabbed my phone.

“I’m calling Eric and I’m telling him I can’t do it. I’ll just be a spinster or whatever it’s called. I’ll grow up and be a lonely engineer with a hundred cats.”

“At least you waited until after Homecoming,” Elvis pointed out.

This was true. Eric had invited me to Homecoming as his date, and at the time I had been convinced that it was going to solidify my feelings for Eric. It hadn’t turned out that way. The whole time at Homecoming, all I could think about was how I wanted to be there with Diego, and how he was probably at Nelli’s Homecoming with her. I shrieked again.

“What?” Elvis asked looking scared.

“Nothing,” I said. I dialed Eric’s number. I didn’t really know what my plan of action was, so I just asked him to come over because I needed to talk to him about something. When I hung up Elvis shook his head at me. “Why are you shaking your head?”

“When you tell a guy you need to talk to him about something, he knows something’s wrong.” He finished his last jelly bean and got up from my bed. “I’m going home, but let me know what happens.”

“You’re not staying? You’re my moral support.”

“You don’t need my support. Dumping boys is something you seem to be good at.”

I wasn’t sure how to take that, but I didn’t dwell on it too much. After Elvis left, I picked up my room, considered changing into something even

bummier than my shorts and T-shirt, and looked through the fridge for something to munch on to calm my nerves. I popped popcorn, and once the popcorn was popped, I didn't want it. So I just sat looking at the bowl of popcorn.

When Eric arrived, I grabbed the bowl and walked to the door. It didn't occur to me that this looked weird. Nothing really occurred to me.

"Hi," I said.

"Hi," he said back.

I paused and looked at him. He just waited for me to invite him in or something.

"Let's sit out here," I said and sat in the doorway. Eric was very confused and sat down in front of me.

"So what's this about?" he asked.

"Popcorn?" I asked as I handed him the bowl. He shook his head, and I held the full bowl on my lap.

"Nikki, what's going on?"

"I tried," I told him. "I really like you. You're so hot, and you're so nice, and you're this great soccer player, and I love your family, and I love playing video games with you while your grandma watches, and I love holding your hand and hanging out with you."

"But I'm not Diego."

I shoved popcorn into my mouth.

"I get it," he said. Why did he have to be so understanding? "You and Diego have a history. I see how you look at him. How he looks at you. The way you ran after him that one day that he got into that fight or whatever it was that happened. That was very telling. I figured this was coming."

"I tried," I said. "I really, really tried."

"That should've been your first clue, you know," he said taking a handful of popcorn. "I bet you never had to try with him. If you have to try then it's probably not meant to be."

"Why are you so perfect?" Now I liked the popcorn. It was perfectly salty and buttery.

He laughed. "Trust me. I'm not perfect. You know that. So what are you going to do? Get back with him?"

"I can't. He has a girlfriend. Stupid Nelli. I don't know if I even want him back. No, I mean, sure, in a perfect world. But I don't need him. I've got my future to think about, and Diego never thinks about his future. I'm going to focus on college, and picking the right one for me, and being an

engineer, and adopting cats. And Diego will probably marry Nelli, and she'll fund all of his art projects, and he'll be a famous artist, and they'll commission him to do a big mural or something for some future war that hasn't happened yet, and his name will be in art books everywhere."

"You have very elaborate thoughts about the future."

I was officially a nerd. "Sorry. I got carried away."

"As a friend," Eric said with a caring smile, "maybe you need to stop worrying so much about the future. You blame Diego for never thinking about it, but you think about it too much. Right now isn't so bad either. And unlike the future, you can control the right now."

"I can't control the right now. I feel like I have no control over anything."

"Because you don't have Diego."

"No, that's not it." Or was it? Nelli certainly had that under control didn't she? She even controlled him now. I wondered what she had him wear today and what party she had him go to. Did she tell him the right things to say as well? "Maybe that's it a little, but not completely, because I've always been like this. Diego used to get mad at me for always pushing him to think about the future."

"Look, I don't know Diego that well, but he seems like the kind of guy that lives in his own world and doesn't care much for rules or the status quo. That's why the girls like him so much in school. All my friends who are girls think it's cool that he has no regard for how things are supposed to be. He's the rebel, and that's what girls like. There's a reason that there's a saying about nice guys finishing last."

"You sound like Elvis," I told him. Elvis was always going on about how nice guys definitely did always finish last.

"Elvis is a smart guy, and if you've noticed, he knows this is a fact. That's why he doesn't even bother trying to ask you out."

I laughed. "Elvis would never ask me out. He's like my brother."

"Because you never gave him a choice to be anything else. Do you really think he's by your side and always looking out for you because he always wanted a sister?"

I suddenly hated my popcorn. I stopped eating and felt guilty all over again.

"Did he tell you this?"

"He didn't have to, Nikki." And then as if sensing that I was about to blame myself for everything wrong in the world he added, "It's not your fault,

and it's not his fault. It's just how things are. Not everyone gets who they want. No matter how many people they pass up while waiting."

The popcorn bowl ended up on his lap, and I ended up burrowing my head in my knees to try and stop the tears from coming. I guess this wasn't what Eric was going for because he quickly discarded the bowl and got to his knees. He rubbed his hand over my back and tried to calm me down.

"I'm sorry," I said to him. I was just so sad that Eric wanted me to be his girlfriend and he wouldn't get that, and Elvis liked me but he wouldn't get that, and I wanted Diego and I wouldn't get him, and Diego's mom wanted her boyfriend but wouldn't get him, and maybe, just maybe, my mom did want my dad after all, and she wouldn't get him, or maybe my dad wanted my mom, and he wouldn't get her. I cried.

Diego

The condo seemed a lot more spacious without all the people in it. It brought back memories of that night, and my eyes landed on the chaise lounge where Nelli had given me my first kiss. My thoughts lingered for a moment and then Trace offered us sodas. We sat in the big living area that had one side of wall that was just windows looking out at nothing but sky and water. It didn't seem real.

"So," Trace said looking at me, "you've got the artist eye. What do you think of this place?"

"I think I'd like it better if it was closer to the ground," I said. "There's something unnatural about living this high up above the world."

"You don't know the half of it," Trace said.

"I like the condo," Nelli said. "I feel like I'm far away from the world when I'm up here."

"Me too," Trace said. "It's probably the only reason I haven't moved."

Nelli kicked her shoes off and moved about the living area, looking for music and turning things on as if she lived there all the time.

"So this art thing," Trace continued, "I heard you got hooked up with Mario. How is that working out for you?"

"Really well. He's amazing. I hope I can be as good as him someday."

"I think you're better," Nelli offered as she put on some hip hop song.

"You're an art critic all of a sudden?" Trace taunted her. She playfully proclaimed she was and started dancing to the hip hop song like she was in a

club. “Well considering I can’t even draw a stick figure, I think what I saw on the yacht is really impressive,” Trace concluded. “I hope your art can bring in good money because this one over here is high maintenance.”

“I am not!” Nelli said dancing over to him. She pushed him which caused him to let out a roll of laughter. “Besides, Diego’s art would make tons of money. He’s that talented. Even Mami said so.”

“Your mother doesn’t know anything about art,” Trace said laughing again.

“No, but she knows what looks good,” Nelli challenged back.

Trace had to agree with that statement. “You have a point. Go put on the track so your boyfriend can hear what song you’re going to be posing for.”

Nelli went back to the stereo and put on the song that I had caught a few times on the radio. It was a popular song among a lot of the kids in school. I suddenly thought about how those same kids might be talking about Nelli after the video aired. How weird.

“You like this song?” Trace asked me.

“Yeah, it’s cool,” I told him. “It’s got a good beat and the kids in school really like it.”

Trace smiled at this.

“It’s going to be so hard,” Nelli said as she listened to the song in thought. “There’s a club scene, a mansion scene, and a yacht scene. I had to get fitted for wardrobe today and Papi is going to pitch a fit.”

“I’m surprised he wasn’t there to oversee that,” Trace said. “Was your mom there?”

“Yeah, she ok’d everything.”

There was something wrong with this picture. “What kind of stuff are you wearing?” I decided to ask.

“For the club I have this small little club dress, for the mansion I have like lingerie, and for the yacht I have this tiny bikini.”

Trace didn’t like this, and neither did I.

“Your mom ok’d this?” Trace asked as he reached for the phone.

“No don’t call her,” Nelli said. “It’s okay. I mean, it’s just a video. The shots are fast so you don’t see anything, and nothing is that revealing.”

“Yeah, but lingerie?” I asked.

“It’s not bad lingerie,” Nelli explained. “It’s this cute, short, satin slip dress and it has a robe. I own like a hundred of them in real life.”

I knew this was true, but there was a difference between owning something for her own use and wearing something in a video that everyone was going to see. Her mom was crazy.

“The wardrobe people should’ve known better,” Trace said reaching for his phone anyway. “I’m calling the director. I’ll be back.” He got up and left to go to his office. Nelli bit her lip as she watched him leave.

“I shouldn’t have said anything,” she said.

“Yes you should’ve. It’s wrong.”

“Why is it wrong? Because I’m sixteen?” she asked as she plopped into Trace’s now empty armchair. “It’s called acting for a reason, Diego. This video isn’t about me being sixteen. It’s about me being the girl of this guy’s dreams. However he wants to fantasize about me, he gets to. In the end it’s not real. I’m just a mannequin, and he can never have me.”

Why did I feel like she was talking about me? But she couldn’t have been, because I did have her, and she definitely wasn’t a mannequin.

“He can’t fantasize about you with your clothes on?” I asked.

“Are you being jealous?” she asked with a smirk.

Is that what it was? I didn’t think so. “It’s not jealousy. It just seems wrong.”

“I will have clothes on. I chose to do this video, and I’m the one that told Mami that I didn’t mind wearing the clothes they picked out. That’s all there is to it.”

“So you make the decisions and you don’t care what anyone else thinks about it?”

“It’s my career,” she said. She sat up straighter in the armchair and stared right at me. “Shouldn’t I be the one to make the decisions?”

“Sure. But that doesn’t mean you don’t listen to the people around you who care about you. Trace didn’t seem happy.”

“Trace still thinks I’m a little girl. I know you don’t think that so why don’t you seem happy?”

I put the soda down on the side table and crossed my ankle over my knee as my leg bounced. I leaned forward to look directly at her as well.

“Because I was with you at the charity show, and I worry about you, and I know for a fact that you can be someone’s fantasy fully clothed.”

Nelli considered this answer and then got up and came over to the couch. She sat next to me as she pulled her legs up and tucked them under her. Then she leaned her head on my shoulder. She didn’t say anything though. I put my arm around her and hugged her into me.

Trace came back out and sat in his armchair, taking a second to look at us before speaking. “I talked to the director and he said that he’ll talk to costume tomorrow and have them find alternate outfits.” Nelli sat up ready to protest, but Trace held his hand up and continued. “They are alternate outfits, meaning that you can try them on tomorrow, and if you really feel that you want the originals then you can go with those. But look at me, Nelli. Only if you want to. Do you hear me? Not your mother, not the director, you. I’m going down with you to make sure that you choose what you want.”

“You can’t go with me,” Nelli protested.

“The fact that you don’t want to wear the outfits in front of me, or your dad, or probably even your boyfriend, says a lot. Doesn’t it?”

Nelli bit her lip again and I shifted my eyes between the two of them waiting for her retort.

“Fine,” she finally said. “I’ll try them on, but I don’t want you there. Diego can come with me.”

Trace motioned to me in a gesture that showed he was fine with that, and I wondered if Nelli really thought I was going to go easier on her than Trace. The dilemma was forgotten, however, as Nelli played me the rest of the artist’s music and Trace quizzed me on which ones I liked best. When it was time to leave, Trace made sure to give Nelli some money to spend.

“Treat this one to a good lunch after you torture him to sit through a wardrobe fitting,” he joked.

I felt warmth and compassion when he grabbed me by the back of my neck and then pat my back and sent us on our way. Now I understood why he had the picture of him and Nelli, and why he kept money in his drawer. The gun, however, was another matter entirely. I could only guess that even though he lived on top of the world, he still wasn’t really safe from it.

27: THE VIDEO

Diego

As it turned out, I wasn't only recruited to help pick out and approve Nelli's wardrobe changes. Nelli also wanted me to be on set with her during the filming of the video. I had suffered through the scenes in the Fisher Island mansion, where Nelli walked around in a slightly longer satin slip with the robe left open so it barely covered anything. The rapper was in the living room, playing poker with his buddies, while Nelli, in this suggestive outfit, brought him drinks. She leaned over his shoulders to give him a kiss on the cheek for good luck so he could win his hand. I had sat behind the camera crew, in Nelli's chair, drawing the scene before me.

Now it was day two, and it was early in the morning. We were at the marina, getting ready to board a yacht where Nelli would be wearing a white string bikini. She would be lounging on the yacht while the rapper enjoyed his champagne and performed his song. My biggest issue with this scene was that it was December, and it was a particularly cold day, which meant that Nelli would probably catch pneumonia and die. I thought it was cruel that they didn't consider a wardrobe change for her benefit.

"Your job," the director said as he handed me a warm blanket, "is to make sure this gets on her every time we're not rolling."

I took the blanket and watched as the rapper got into place. The music was cued and the cameras rolled. The fact that her teeth weren't chattering, her body wasn't shaking, and she wasn't instinctively moving to keep herself warm, were the first indication I ever had that maybe Nelli was really born to

be an actress. As soon as the director yelled, “Cut,” I hurried over to her and threw the warm blanket around her.

“You okay?” I asked her.

“Yeah,” she said. The PA quickly brought her a hot cup of coffee. She took a sip and looked at me. “Having fun being my personal assistant?”

“Is that what I am? How much do I get paid again?”

She gave me a quick kiss. “Don’t worry. You’ll get paid.”

I smiled at that answer and then got yelled at by the make-up lady as she ran over to retouch Nelli’s lipstick. I waited until the last possible second to take off her blanket. I walked back to my corner of the yacht where I could sit and watch. I felt like someone was staring at me, and as the music began its playback, I looked over to see the rapper looking at me intently. I wasn’t sure what his problem was until I saw him move into action and walk over to Nelli. He looked over her body and dropped a kiss on her neck that I didn’t think was scripted.

The shoot went on longer than I had hoped. By the time it was done, I was pretty sure that Nelli had to have turned into a Popsicle. She ran down into the stateroom to change, and I went with her, suddenly feeling that I needed to be with her at all times.

“I hope you weren’t too bored,” she said. The bikini was gone in a flash and she worked on getting her clothes on in record time.

“I was too worried about your well-being to be bored.”

She laughed and finished getting dressed. Then she took my hand and gave me a long, lingering kiss before we left the stateroom. We emerged onto the deck of the yacht and were greeted by her mom who had been speaking with the director.

“I just looked at the footage,” her mother said. She took her daughter into her arms and hugged her tightly. “You looked amazing. Just beautiful.”

“Thanks, Mami,” she said. I looked away because I’d rather stare out at Biscayne Bay than the person that Nelli always seemed to become when her mother was around.

As they spoke, I focused instead on the rise and fall of the waves, the contrast of the white yacht against the blue topaz sea, and the biting wind that felt the need to blow more cold air than necessary in our direction. Then, out of nowhere, I noticed a building in the distance that seemed to beckon me. It wasn’t until we were cruising parallel to it that I realized it was Vizcaya. How out of place it looked when you saw it from the ocean. An architectural oasis

surrounded by lush green trees, perfectly framed, and perfectly posed to be rendered from this most pure and unobstructed of angles.

I sat down and took out my sketch book, drawing faster than I had ever drawn before. I had to get this image down before it faded from my view. I had to draw the most perfect place I had ever been. And I wanted to get it right because even though Nelli was here to see it for herself, I wanted Nikki to also know how cool Vizcaya looked from the ocean.

Nikki

I never tended to go over to Elvis'. Elvis didn't like people coming over because his mom stressed him out and he liked to escape to other people's homes. That didn't stop me from coming over today though. I gave him plenty of warning to be nice. When I got there, he practically pushed me into his bedroom and locked the door so his mother wouldn't interrupt us.

"Why did you have to come over?" he asked me.

"I needed to talk to you. Serious talk. Friend to friend."

"How is that different from what we normally do?" He dusted off his comforter with his hand, even though it hadn't needed to be dusted, so I could sit down. I sat on his bed which was kind of low to the floor. He sat beside me unsure of why I was there.

"You knew Diego was never going to come to my job. That's why you wouldn't pick a date."

"Him again?" Elvis asked. He grabbed his remote and put on the stereo at a low volume so that the Latin radio station came on. "Alright, what's troubling you about Diego now?" He gave me his full attention.

"You. You came to see me every single day."

"It's not like I had anything better to do. Not to mention all the free coffee you gave me. Don't tell my mom about the coffee though."

I tried to give him a look that showed I wasn't playing around. I wasn't joking, and this wasn't the conversation he thought it was. "Why didn't you try and get with me after I broke up with Diego? Why did you support Eric instead of trying yourself?"

"Why would I? We see how that worked out for Eric."

"But you didn't even try."

Elvis looked down at the remote in his hands. He played with the buttons that didn't have an effect on the stereo. "I'm not like Diego or Eric. You know that."

"That isn't true. Look at you, Elvis. You recorded a demo. You go on auditions. You're trying to make it. You take chances all the time."

"I do it for my mom," Elvis said. "She's the one who thinks I can do this. Just because I can sing, she thinks that's all I need to make it. I know better. I know why I didn't get into that boyband, or that TV show, or that variety show. It's the same reason that Nelli gets to be in that stupid gum commercial. Marketability. I am not marketable. My mom doesn't see that, but I do."

"That's stupid. I think you're marketable. I think your voice is enough. I think that you've given up."

"But it's not what I want to do, Nikki. I don't want to be a pop singer. I don't want to move to L.A. and go out there and fight against other people who are trying to do the same thing. There's only so much rejection a guy can take. You know what I would rather do? Stay here. Do wedding and fashion photography for a living, and sing in the church choir for fun."

I wanted to hug him so hard. So I did. I hugged him tight, and I gave him a kiss on the cheek, and then I told him what I thought. "I think you should do it. I'm staying here too, and I'm going to school here to be some kind of engineer. You should really stay."

"Right. Tell that to my mom."

"At some point, you have to tell your mom what you want. You can't live her life. You have to live your own, Elvis. Like Diego and his art, and Eric and his soccer. You just have to do it. I think your mom would want you to be happy instead of miserable and living her dream. I don't care what she says." I hoped that was true. Elvis' mom wasn't awful. She would understand once she got over the fact that he wasn't going to do what she wanted him to do. At least I hoped so for his sake.

Elvis thought about this and then he brought up the name that still managed to make my skin crawl. "I understand Nelli. A lot. I understand the pressure she's under. It's harder for her because she's a girl. The industry is harder on girls."

"You're seriously talking to me about Nelli?" I asked with indignation.

"You always talk to me about Diego. I think I get a chance to talk about Nelli," he countered. I hated that he had a point.

“I didn’t know you felt that way about her.” Was it every guy? If Eric had met Nelli, would he have forgotten all about me quicker than he could say Pelé?

“Just listen to me. When I saw that gum commercial on TV, I realized that would never be me. It’s always going to be her, and people like her, and guys that look good with girls like her. I tried to point this out to my mom and she told me that I was better than commercials. She told me I shouldn’t compare myself to girls because boys had more lee-way. She doesn’t get it, Nikki. And she never will.”

“Run away?”

“And leave her alone? To what? I’m all she has. Her whole life has been devoted to making me the next big thing.”

This was so frustrating. Why couldn’t everyone just have cool moms like mine?

“She has to find her own dream,” I said. “For herself. Tell her that. Tell her to think about herself and that you have a dream too. Tell her your dream is to live your own dream while she lives hers.” Elvis smiled at me and I felt like he had come up with a good joke or something. “What?” I asked him.

“You’re nagging me the way you used to nag Diego.”

“Yeah?” I smiled as well. “Is it hot?”

“No, it’s annoying.”

“Great,” I said. Then I sighed and took the remote out of his hand. “Okay, fine, it’s not that easy. Obviously it’s not that easy. But just think about it. Think about choosing your own path. And if you decide to do it and your mom kicks you out of the house, then you can stay with me and my mom.”

“That’s actually reassuring,” he said. “Thanks, Nikki.”

“Anytime. You know, in another life, one in where Diego didn’t exist, I’d totally go out with you.”

“No you wouldn’t, but that’s nice of you to say.”

“I mean it. You’re awesome. And with my engineering salary and your fashion photography salary, we’d be set for life.”

“We’d have a marriage of convenience.”

“I’m starting to think that those are the only ones that exist.”

Elvis took the remote back from me and put the music on louder as a song he liked came on.

“You’re probably right,” he said. “Now we’re going to dance.”

I laughed and followed his dancing lead to the best of my ability. Deep down inside I knew that Elvis had always been there for me, that he cared about me, that he listened to me, that he supported me, and that he had made me laugh when I most wanted to cry. He had forced me to go out there and reclaim my confidence when I had pushed it so very far away. Diego would never be as good to me as Elvis was, but it didn't change that I wanted Diego so badly.

Nelli

It was two in the morning, and I felt like I had been working for twenty-four hours straight. I had gotten the afternoon off to go home, warm up, and take a nap, but now I was at a club to shoot the final scene of the night. There were so many extras in the club that I felt claustrophobic. It didn't help that the dress on me was so tight and my feet were already killing me from the stilettos I had on. Sexy was not what I felt at that moment.

"Did you lose your watchdog?" Luc asked me. He came up to me, holding a half-empty bottle of water, and dressed in his club scene outfit. His shirt shimmered, the cross that hung from his neck sparkled, and his pants looked ready to fall off. I had the thought of tugging at them for him, but then quickly focused my eyes on his.

"My watchdog?"

"Your little boyfriend that's been around."

"Oh, no he's sitting behind the crew somewhere," I looked in the direction of the crew. There were so many people that it was impossible to see anyone in the dark club. "And he's not my watchdog. I thought he'd like to see me work. He's never seen anything like this."

"Neither have I," Luc said. "You ready to dance with me?"

Was I ever. I walked out to the dance floor with him and we got in our places just as the director called for everyone to get ready. Once the music played, I started dancing with Luc. He was a really smooth dancer with a way of moving his hips that didn't seem humanly natural. For a moment, I forgot that this was a video shoot. It was just me and a guy at a club, flirting with our bodies, and getting caught up in the heat and energy of the beats and rhythm. Then his hands began to roam down my body, and I knew I was in trouble. When our eyes locked he leaned in and kissed me, and I didn't stop him. The cameras kept rolling, and I kissed him back because that kiss was

full of the type of passion one only finds in a hot club on a Friday night. When he pulled away, I could barely keep steady enough to continue dancing. Luc had not problems doing his moves. I cursed when the director yelled, "Cut!"

Then I raised my hand and slapped Luc. "That wasn't part of the script."

"But it should've been," he said not even reacting to the slap. Maybe I needed to slap him harder. "What are you doing with that boy?"

"That's none of your business."

"Nelli, Luc, that was genius," the director said as he walked through the crowd and over to us. "Pure genius. Luc, you need to get ready for the performance shots. Nelli, you were perfect. We're done with all of your shots. It was such a pleasure to work with you."

My eyes were still on Luc's. His eyes were still on mine. Neither of us wanted to be the first to turn away. I broke first because I needed to get out of there. I thanked the director as well and rushed to the backstage area of the club where the dressing rooms were. I opened the door and paused when I saw Diego in there sitting on the couch and doodling away on his sketch pad. I shut the door, locking it, and sat down beside him so I could take off my shoes. I looked over to see his sketch and saw me and Luc kissing. He had seen it after all.

"So you *were* jealous," I said as I tried to make a joke that was probably a bad joke in retrospect.

He closed his sketchbook and tossed it on the table beside the couch. "What am I doing here, Nelli?"

"I asked you to be here."

"Why? You didn't need me here."

"I wanted you to understand."

"Understand what? That everyone wants you? That people come up with excuses like making videos so they can find a way to kiss you?"

"It's not like that."

"You know, I'm starting to think that you like this. That you like being used. That you like being treated like a piece of meat."

That hurt. That hurt a lot. I should've known that he wouldn't understand either. He couldn't see just how much of myself I had to shut off to do these scenes, or how much I had to pretend to be that mannequin so I could parade in front of everyone that was watching. I bit my lip to hold back my emotions and leaned down to undo the shoes. I took them off and replaced them in the box they had come in. Then he broke the silence.

“Of course I’m jealous,” he said. “Happy? I hated seeing his hands on you. I hated how he looked at you, and how he knew he was getting away with it. I wanted you to push him away each time he kissed you.”

“It’s my job,” I whispered. I kept my hands on the shoe box. “I couldn’t just push him away, Diego. You have to understand that.” I turned around to face him, getting a bit of my conviction back. “Someday, someone is going to pay you a lot of money to do a work of art, and you’re going to go and do it, and they’re going to tell you what they want you to do instead, and they’re going to spring it on you out of nowhere, and you’re going to keep doing it because it’s your job. He doesn’t get me at the end. Remember the story? I’m just his mannequin. You have the real thing.”

He was silent again, but his face had softened. His demeanor had relaxed and he looked more like a petulant child than anything else.

“I hate your job,” he said.

I smiled and then I shook my head at him and walked to the couch, messing his hair up with my hand as he protested. When he tried to mess my hair up in retaliation, I fought him off while laughing and somehow we ended up lying on the couch. He moved his fingers over my lips as if to make sure they were still his to kiss, and then he replaced his fingers with his lips. I was so glad that I had locked the door.

28: HAPPY TWEET DAY

Nikki

I was so conflicted today. It was Diego's seventeenth birthday. That was a super huge milestone. Getting him big balloons like I used to do when we were together just wasn't appropriate. Or was it? We were still friends. Small balloons then? I had bought various sizes and colors just in case, but none of them were speaking to me.

"What the..." Elvis said as he fought off balloons to get into my room. "We're going to miss the bus."

"It's Diego's birthday. I need the right balloon or balloons."

Elvis seemed perturbed, and he started looking through all the balloons. He grabbed a small, blue one with a bird that said, "Happy Tweet Day!"

"Happy Tweet Day?" I asked Elvis. "Really?"

"You bought this balloon," he argued.

"I just grabbed anything birthday related."

"Nikki..."

"Fine," I said, grabbing my backpack and the "Happy Tweet Day" balloon from his hand. I picked up a banana as I passed by the kitchen. Then we ran to the bus stop and reached it just as the bus pulled up. Eric had offered to continue to take us to school, but I hadn't felt right about it. So Elvis and I had gone back to our bus routine.

At school, I didn't even bother to expect Diego on time, so I tied the balloon to his locker and left him a note saying, "Happy 17th!" It was so weird to think that Diego was seventeen. When we had met in middle

school, he had been this short, quiet kid that always wore blue and only seemed to come alive in PE when he got to play basketball or run track. I always hated PE and I used to try and find excuses to sit out of the activities that we had to do.

The first time Diego and I had talked to each other was in sixth grade when a typical rainy day had forced us indoors for a round of H-O-R-S-E. Diego was really good at this game and I was really bad at it, so in a sadistic effort to crush my self-esteem, the PE teachers placed me into his group along with three other boys who could hold their own just fine. I was last in the rotation, and it was a no-brainer that I was going to be out first. This was fine with me. It meant I got to sit down quicker and just watch while they continued to play.

Once the game began, Diego made the first shot from a fairly close distance, not wanting to make it too difficult for everyone. The other kids had no problem making this shot, but I missed. I earned my “H.”

The next shot was from the other side, from the same distance, and the same level of difficulty. One of the other kids missed along with me. I was now a “HO,” which all the boys pointed out with laughter, except Diego, who just dribbled as he thought about where he wanted to shoot from next. He decided to do a lay-up, and the other boys just followed. Now the boys taunted me more because I was no longer a “HO,” I was now a “HOR.” Even worse.

Diego then went to the free throw line, where one of the boys became a “HO” and the taunting turned to him. I was now a “HORS” and therefore no longer interesting. Since it was clear that this was going to be my last shot, Diego, who had never spoken to me in my life, turned to me and asked, “Is there anywhere you can make a shot from?”

Here I was, at the age of eleven, completely out of my element, being taunted for being a “HO” and a “HOR,” and the leader of our group had actually stopped to take my feelings into consideration by seeing if there was a way I could stay in the game. Even though we had never technically existed to each other before that moment, I decided then that I wanted to be friends with Diego. That had been pretty cool of him, and I liked people who were pretty cool.

“I don’t really play basketball,” I told him. “I don’t know what I’m doing.”

“I’ll show you when we’re done with the game,” he said. So after that, he made hard shots that no one else could make so that the game finished

quicker. Then he gave the ball to the other guys and went to the bin to grab another basketball just so he could teach me how to shoot.

Now as I stood next to his locker with the “Happy Tweet Day!” balloon bouncing between the locker and my head, I suddenly realized that I was Diego’s Elvis. He had been nice to me for the same reason I had been nice to Elvis. And just as Elvis had decided to be my friend because I was nice to him, I had decided to be Diego’s friend because he was nice to me. I guess it was only appropriate that I left him the balloon that Elvis had picked out.

Diego

I had meant to wake up and try to get to school on time. I knew that Nikki was probably waiting anxiously to give me something for my birthday. I swear my alarm never went off. I got ready as quickly as I could. When I opened my bedroom door, I smelled the distinct scent of empanadas and pancakes.

I walked into the kitchen and found my mom putting food on two plates. She came over to me and gave me a kiss on the cheek.

“Happy Birthday, baby,” she said. Why was she here?

“Mom, you’re really late to work.”

“I took the day off,” she said with a smile. “It’s not every day your kid turns seventeen.” She handed me the plate and motioned for me to sit down at the table. She joined me soon after, giving me a cup of orange juice. I devoured the empanadas which still tasted exactly the same as how she used to make them when I was a kid. It was amazing how some things never changed.

“I can’t really miss school today,” I told her.

“I know. I’ll drop you off when you’re done. And then I thought I would pick you up and we could do dinner.”

Had I, for a moment, considered that my mom wanted to actually do something for my birthday, I would’ve made sure to include her in my plans. But this was kind of out of the blue. “Um, I made plans with Nelli already.”

“She can come along. I haven’t even met her yet.” There was no way I was getting out of this.

“I’ll call her and let her know.” My mom was excited and I let her be as I focused on eating the rest of my food.

Once I got to school, I signed myself into the front office and then stood outside as I texted Nelli to let her know about the change of plans. When I arrived at my locker, I found a balloon attached to the handle. I knew it was from Nikki. I looked at it and laughed. “Happy Tweet Day?” I asked myself. What did that even mean? I got my books together then carried my balloon with me to class.

I sat down discreetly in the back and opened my cell phone to see that Nelli had texted me back. She said she was okay with the change in plans. I thanked her and then took out my notebook, suddenly inspired to draw a bird while the teacher talked about whatever it was he was talking about.

I wondered what the significance of the funny balloon was as it bobbed behind my desk. I knew that Nikki always put a lot of thought into everything she did, and I could only assume that this was the most neutral balloon she could think to give me. The first time that Nikki had ever given me a balloon in school had been on my twelfth birthday. We hadn’t been friends for very long, but we had been friends long enough for her to have written down my birthday in her Hello Kitty planner.

At school that day, I had found her waiting for me, with the balloon in her hand, as soon as I got off the bus. It had been in the shape of a basketball and simply said “Happy Birthday” on it. It too had been a neutral balloon, but the act wasn’t neutral at all. It was an act that showed that she was serious about us being friends, and I had taken the balloon and thanked her for it with a hug. It had been the first time I had ever hugged her.

On my thirteenth birthday, she had given me a balloon in the shape of a birthday cake that again had said “Happy Birthday.” This balloon was bigger, and this time there was a card and a present to go along with it. We were really good friends by then, and I thanked her with a kiss on the cheek. It was the first time I had ever given her any kind of kiss.

On my fourteenth birthday, there had been several balloons, of various colors, attached to a stack of fun coloring books to weigh the balloons down. I was so excited by it all that I had hugged her longer than I ever had before and also kissed her cheek. I ended up spending the entire day at her house just coloring and listening to music, and having a great time hanging out with her. There had been several times on that day that I had wanted to really kiss her, but there hadn’t been the right moment. At school there had been too many people around. At home her mom had kept coming in to bring us more snacks.

It wasn't until that summer at the illegal bonfire that I finally found the perfect chance. She had been wearing a purple tank top and several necklaces of various lengths. We were surrounded by a bunch of kids from school, and they were all being loud and running around and laughing. I was sitting beside her on the sand, and all I could think about was how beautiful she looked as the bonfire made her blond hair look golden and fiery. I remembered thinking that she was the most perfect girl I had ever met, and all I wanted to do was touch her, and kiss her, and let her know how I felt.

She hadn't been expecting it, but she responded to it, and after we were done, I looked at her for her reaction. She was blushing and she grabbed my hand and asked me if this meant that she could call me her boyfriend. I said yes and I kissed her again. I wondered how long she had wanted to be able to call me that, and I wondered why she had never bothered to make the first move, but then I realized that the balloons were probably her way of working up to that.

The bell rang. I got up and grabbed the "Happy Tweet Day!" balloon and paused as I thought about it. She was back to neutral, but in reality, this was worse than neutral. The first time had been a basketball, a clear indication of the first time we had really met. This balloon was devoid of any connection, and deep down inside, I felt a blunt soreness.

Nikki

Our art class had turned into a photo class for the new semester, and I sat beside Elvis who was ready to take a picture of Diego as soon as he walked in through the door.

"What if he doesn't have the balloon?" Elvis asked.

"He'll have it," I said. Although part of me wouldn't blame him for ditching it. I could think of a hundred better balloons, all dancing around my bedroom at this very moment. What was I going to do with all those balloons?

Then Elvis took a picture and I looked up in time to see Diego walking in with the balloon. I couldn't help it. I almost fell off my chair in laughter. Elvis laughed too and Diego walked over to our table, not sure why we were laughing, but joining in.

"Okay," he said after a moment, "what's so funny?"

“Nikki’s balloon,” Elvis explained. “Happy Tweet Day!” We all laughed again.

We spent the rest of the class photographing the balloon from odd angles, and with different people holding it, and getting as much mileage out of the nonsensical balloon as possible. I had exhausted all of my possibilities and was sitting at the table, watching as Elvis tried to take a dramatic posed shot of the balloon. Diego was sitting beside me, drawing the balloon in his sketchpad.

“Happy Chirp Day would’ve worked better,” I observed. “At least it would’ve been like a baby bird or something. I don’t know.”

“Someone got paid a lot of money to come up with Happy Tweet Day,” Diego pointed out.

“But that’s just it. It doesn’t rhyme with ‘birth,’ it has nothing to do with birth. I mean, they should get fired.”

Diego looked at me in that way that let me know I was being too logical again. I had missed that look. “I think it was just supposed to be fun. It’s cute.”

“Yeah, I guess,” I said. Then I let my curiosity get the best of me and asked, “So what are your Tweet Day plans for the day?”

“I’m going out to dinner with my mom and Nelli.”

“Oh.” That was adorable. I couldn’t remember the last time I had done dinner with Diego and his mom. “Well, have fun.”

He smiled, probably unsure of how to respond to me because he wasn’t sure if I meant it. I wasn’t even sure if I had meant it. If we were still together, he would’ve been coming over to my house tonight, and Elvis and I would have thrown him a birthday party complete with noisemakers and pointy paper hats. Dinner with his mom and his girlfriend was so grown up. Maybe that’s what it meant to be turning seventeen.

“Oh I get it,” Elvis said as he looked at the balloon serendipitously. “The bird is trying to say Happy Birthday in bird language. So birds only say, “tweet.” Which is why he could only say Happy Tweet Day. It’s bird language.”

Diego and I just looked at Elvis, and then the three of us busted out laughing again.

Nelli

I was nervous. I had never met Diego's mom. I knew that he loved her a lot and thought highly of her, even though he had been upset with her lately for some reason. I thought Diego's family life was interesting, but how couldn't I? It was so different than mine. I couldn't understand nor imagine what it would have been like to grow up without Papi, or without Mami always guiding all the aspects of my life.

Diego didn't like to talk about his family a lot, but from the little things he had told me, I knew that his mom taking the day off from work and wanting to spend it with him was very important to him. I almost felt like an intruder for tagging along. Originally, I was going to take him to dinner and then show him his big birthday surprise, but the surprise could wait.

I didn't know what to wear, so I wore what I would normally wear if I was going to have dinner with my parents. I found a nice, tasteful, black and gray dress that was classy. I layered some necklaces and a simple pair of earrings. I arrived at Diego's house and rang the doorbell, holding a present in my hands. He opened the door and I was so happy to see that he had dressed up as well in a casual suit with his hair slicked back. I liked being able to see every single part of his face.

"Happy birthday," I said, holding the present out to him. He took it and thanked me with a kiss then let me in. I had been in Diego's house before. With his mother never around, it was a safe place to hang out and spend time together. It never usually had a distinct smell, but today it smelled like food and domesticity. I liked it.

"Should I open it now?" he asked.

"Yeah," I said. "It's not your real present. It's just until you get the real one."

"A fake present," he said opening the box. "I like it already." I watched him open it and pull out the blue cashmere sweater I had bought for completely selfish reasons. I knew that it would bring out the intensity of his eyes, and I knew that it would feel good under my touch whenever I held him.

"Thanks," he said caressing the fabric with his fingers. I imagined he was figuring out how he would paint the texture. His mother came out and smiled at me and Diego quickly introduced us. I didn't know how I expected his mom to look. Part of me thought she would look like Diego, even though he had told me before that he must have looked like his dad. She was very

young, even younger than Mami, which made me wonder just how old she had been when she had him. She was thin, and her straight and impeccably styled hair looked more blond than brown.

“It’s so nice to meet you, Nelli.” His mother’s voice sounded like it should belong to a teenager or a cheerleader. I really couldn’t get over her youthfulness.

“It’s nice to meet you, too,” I said.

Then the three of us left together to go to the Italian restaurant that Diego had once told me was his favorite. I sat in the backseat as his mom drove, even though Diego offered me the front. I listened to their conversation which was about how he was surviving school this semester and about how he was really enjoying his photography class. It was a safe conversation between two people who didn’t talk much and who were well aware that someone was sitting in the backseat.

At the restaurant, we were seated in a booth where I sat next to Diego and his mom sat across from us. We ordered appetizers and I drank my water while we waited for our food to be served.

“So Diego said you were in a music video,” his mom said.

“Yeah, it debuted this week at number one.” There had been a big party to commemorate this and I had stayed as far away from Luc as humanly possible. It helped that I stayed by Trace’s side the entire time.

“That sounds exciting,” she said in the way most people reacted to this knowledge. “I bet it’s so fun to do a video.”

“She almost caught pneumonia and died,” Diego said, and I shot him a look.

“It is fun. It was really cold that day, but overall it’s a fun process.”

“Are you going to be in anymore?” she asked next.

“I don’t know yet. I hope so. Mami and I are hoping that it can move me to the next level. Maybe get a show or a film out of it.”

She looked impressed in a way that let Diego know that she completely approved of me. “You found yourself a future star. A beautiful one at that.”

“She’s more than that,” Diego said. I wanted to kiss him.

“Of course she is,” his mother said. “How do you do in school?”

“Really well. I usually get straight A’s. Sometimes I end up with a B in science. It’s my worst subject.”

“That’s really great. Maybe you can help Diego with his school work.”

“Mom,” Diego pleaded. “It’s my birthday. I’d rather not talk about school.”

“Okay,” she said, taking a drink of her iced tea. She looked at me again. “Do you like to do art as well?”

“I can’t even draw a circle,” I confessed. “But Diego’s amazing. I’ve never known anyone who could do what he can do. I wish I had that kind of talent.”

“Me too,” she said. “I don’t know where he gets his talent from. So what are some of your talents? Other than acting.”

My talents? I wasn’t even sure acting was a talent. I had been through a lot of acting training in order to be able to do it. Diego had been born just knowing how to draw. The only thing I could think of that came close to a talent was my dancing.

“I like to dance,” I said.

“She’s a really great dancer,” Diego said which surprised me. When had he ever seen me dance? Really dance. Not just having fun at a party.

“I bet. What kind of dancing? Ballet?”

I must’ve made a face because both Diego and his mom laughed at me. “I’ve taken ballet, but I love to do lyrical, and tap, and definitely hip hop.”

“Do you dance in the video?” she asked me as she offered what was left of the appetizer to us. I declined it, but Diego went ahead and split it with her.

“Not really. There’s a club scene where I dance, but it’s not choreographed or anything.” Now I wanted the subject to change.

Our food came out soon after, and I found myself once again watching as Diego interacted with his mom. She had moved the topic over to his art, and I listened as he told her about Mario and the private lessons he was getting. She asked him who was paying for it, and he looked confused. Then he looked at me.

“Who *is* paying for it?” He asked me. He had never given it a thought that Mami had set him up with a professional who obviously would have to be paid for those types of services.

“I think he owes Mami a favor,” I told him. I didn’t know if it was true, but I had a feeling it was the best answer to give right now.

“He should be paid,” Diego’s mom said. “Let your mother know that I can reimburse him, or send him a check.”

“I’ll let her know,” I told her, but I knew that Mami wouldn’t hear of it. She had set this up for a reason, and even I didn’t really want to know what that reason was.

As we finished our food, the waiters brought out a small piece of cake with a candle on it. They then butchered an off-tone version of “Happy Birthday.” Diego sunk in his seat as his face began to glow red. I took out my camera and caught the moment. He blew out the candle and I applauded along with the rest of the restaurant.

Nikki

I hadn’t been looking for the charm Diego had given me two Christmases ago. My mom had asked me to put together a bag of things to donate for charity, and as I went through my drawers I found the charm, still on its necklace, and still waiting to be worn. I hadn’t worn it since the day that Elvis had won the bagel store bet. I stared at the charm, at our initials, at the sentiment. D + N. It was supposed to be Diego + Nikki, not Diego + Nelli. Had he purposely left it just as initials knowing that one day it would be him and Nelli instead? If I gave this charm back to him, would he turn around and give it to her?

My mom knocked on my door and then came in. “Need help or are you done?” I looked at her, still holding the charm, and not moving. She walked over and saw it and took it from my hand to look at it closer. “Do you want to talk about it?”

“When I broke up with Eric, I came to terms with the fact that I wasn’t over Diego, and I probably wouldn’t ever be.”

“Are you sure it’s a fact?”

“How did you do it? How did you get over dad?”

Mom took a deep breath and sat down on my bed. “Who said I ever got over him?”

“But you divorced him,” I said.

“Your dad...well you know how he is.” She was so uncomfortable talking about this, and I knew I should just tell her to stop and that she didn’t have to, but I had to understand. I needed to learn from her right now. “He just never made anything easy. His priorities were never right. We were fighting more than we weren’t, and I didn’t want you to grow up like that, so I made the decision to cut him out of our lives. But I never got over him.”

“Is that why you’ve never dated anyone else?”

“Hey, I’ve tried,” she said, pretending to be offended. I had no doubt my mom had been asked by many guys to go out. My mom was pretty, and I

liked to think that I looked like her. “I’ve gone on a few dates here and there, but they’re not him.”

“Have you ever thought of getting back together with him?”

“Sure, but then I remember why I let him go in the first place.” She gave me a concerned look and reached out to take my hand. She pulled me closer so that I could sit beside her. “I’m going to tell you something a bit weird. Or maybe it’s not weird. I’m not sure how many moms have this kind of conversation with their daughters, but we’ve never really been conventional.”

That was true. We were seriously like best friends. The whole mom thing was just icing on the cake. “Okay, what is it?”

“I’ve always liked Diego for you.”

I wasn’t expecting her to say that at all. She did? “Really?”

“He’s a good kid. A lot of people don’t see that about him, but he is. He’s polite and respectful and he wants everything to be okay. So he does what he can to make it that way. When I first saw the two of you together, it was after school and you had to stay for some activity. When I went to pick you up, he was there next to you, keeping you company. He didn’t even have an activity. He just stayed because he knew you had to, and he wasn’t going to have you wait there alone for me.”

I vaguely remembered that. I had been asked to be on some student committee to come up with ideas for dealing with various student issues. My English teacher had recommended me for it, but I had found the entire thing kind of boring. Luckily we only had to meet three times. I looked at my mom surprised that she remembered it.

“Diego always did stuff like that,” I told her. “He sat with me during lunch even though I didn’t ask him to, or next to me whenever there would be an assembly. We just got along so well. I think that’s why we’ve been able to get through this and work on our friendship again.”

At first she didn’t say anything, and then she shook her head at me and motioned around the room. “Buying a million balloons because you wanted to make sure you would pick just the right one shows that this isn’t about friendship. You, holding on to this charm, isn’t about friendship. I know what this is, and I want it for you, and I am so sorry that it’s not yours, because you deserve it. You deserve to have everything you want, especially this.”

Why was she doing this to me? My face contorted as I struggled against the strong emotion that was now welling in my chest.

“I can’t have him now. Don’t you understand? He draws her. He never drew me. Not until I said something. Not until his guilty conscience inspired him to draw a picture of me and put that stupid necklace on it.” I glared at the charm in her hand.

“But that’s what I’m telling you.” She looked directly into my eyes. “There was a time when you were the one that inspired him. And he didn’t show it by drawing you. He showed it by being with you.”

“That’s not the same thing. We were friends. I don’t even think he ever wanted me as anything more.”

“That’s what you’re telling yourself to help you cope with this, but you know the truth. You know that he did want you as more than just a friend, and you know that he’s not good at showing those kinds of emotions. That’s why he hides behind his sketchbook. That’s how he expresses himself. But with you he could be open. He could talk to you. He didn’t have to hide behind his art.”

I didn’t understand why she was telling me this, but I held strong and pushed down the cries and screams that I wanted to let loose.

“What are you trying to tell me?”

She took another deep breath before answering. “Diego reminds me a lot of your father, but unlike your father, Diego doesn’t make you miserable. He makes you shine even brighter than you normally do. He pushes you out of your comfort zone. He forces you to believe in emotions instead of logic. He forces you to look at things creatively instead of just rationally. Yes, he can be irresponsible. Yes, he can drive you crazy with his nonchalant attitude about things you hold important. And yes, he wouldn’t know a priority if it hit him over the head. But, he challenges you in a way that, without realizing, you love to be challenged. And he cares about you in a way that you can’t fathom. Not because he cares more or less than you do, but because he cares differently. I guess what I’m trying to tell you, is that, unlike me and your dad, you have a reason to try and get him back.”

I shook my head at her. She was so wrong. “I can’t get him back. If I could remember a time that he ever looked at me the way he looked at her then maybe. But mom, you didn’t see it. You weren’t there. It was like he was looking at the most perfect work of art ever created. I deserve to be looked at like that too.”

She held the charm up and pointed to the N. “What does that stand for?”

“I don’t know. I thought it stood for Nikki, but now I’m convinced it stands for Nelli.”

“I’m starting to think that the one obsessed with that girl isn’t Diego.”

I glared at my mom. That was not nice, and totally uncalled for. She placed the charm back into my hands and closed my fingers over it.

“You need to stop comparing yourself to her,” my mom said to me. “That’s why you lost him. Not because she stole him from you with her looks, but because you stopped being you the moment you started fearing her. That’s not the Nikki that he fell for.”

Holy five million birthday balloons in my room! My mom was right. How did she do that? I had let things get out of hand for far too long. It was time for me to get it together and be me again. Me. Nikki. The girl that wasn’t jealous of anyone because I liked me and my life just fine thank you very much. I looked at the charm in my hand and smiled, and then I gave my mom a hug so tight she had to gasp for air when I released her.

I grabbed my cell phone and called Elvis right away.

“Hey,” he said when he picked up.

“Hey!”

“Now that I’m deaf, what’s up?”

“I’m done.”

Elvis paused. “You’re done?”

“Yep, I’m done being heartbroken Nikki.”

“I’ll believe that when I see it.”

“Believe it, Elvis. We’re going to play Monopoly, and we’re inviting Diego and Nelli to join us.”

Elvis paused again. “Did you hit your head?”

“When I say I’m done, I mean done. Hey, you wouldn’t happen to want to come over and help me pop these balloons would you?”

“I’ll be there in ten.”

I hung up and looked at my mom like I was on a mission, and she probably wondered if she had inspired me to do something crazy, but she hadn’t. She had just inspired me to be myself.

Diego

I liked the fake gift that Nelli had gotten me, but it didn’t compare to the real gift. I was now standing in a brand new studio, a studio that was three times the size of my last one. It felt new, like if it had just been built for me

personally. It was gray and industrial and spacious like a gallery, and it was on the second floor above a coffee shop and a store that sold paintings.

“What do you think?” she asked me. I wanted to tell her that I loved it, but I didn’t.

“It’s big.”

“I know. That’s the point. Your artwork was starting to fall out of yours.”

That was true. I was running out of places to put things, but she was over exaggerating. The studio was everything an artist could want, but it didn’t feel organic enough, and most importantly, it didn’t feel like it was mine. Then so many emotions came hitting me all at once that I wasn’t sure what I was feeling. I grabbed the chair that was against the wall and placed it toward the middle, sitting down so I could feel the space, but all I felt was an internal conflict that I couldn’t make out.

“What are you thinking?” she asked me as she walked toward where I sat.

I was thinking that the first time someone bought me a studio, it felt like bribery, and as it turned out it was, because Chris knew that he was wrong in manipulating my mother and keeping her on the side. So in order to keep her happy and right where he wanted her, he got me a studio so that she felt that he cared about me and so that I could remain out of the way, out of sight, out of mind.

This wasn’t that different. This felt like bribery too. Only this time it was Nelli’s mom who could now, when she wanted to, show off the artist that her daughter was dating. She could take people to a professional location to make it look like I was legit, acceptable, and worthy of her daughter. If I took this studio, I was agreeing to be a puppet that her mom could manipulate, just as her mom manipulated her.

“Diego, talk to me,” Nelli said, falling to her knees and placing her hands on my leg. She looked up at me with her worried brown eyes, probably realizing that if I said no to this, her mother would be more than upset with me. Then she’d be disappointed in her for not being able to make me do whatever was necessary to keep things as they should be.

“What will happen if I don’t take this studio?” I asked her straight out.

“Why wouldn’t you take it?”

“Just answer my question.”

“Mami’s told a lot of people about you. She wants you to be ready to show your work.”

“And if I don’t?”

“Then she probably won’t let us be together.” What was really crazy about that comment was that I didn’t know if Nelli was lying or telling the truth. “You have to understand,” she continued, and I could hear the soft plea in her voice, “Mami likes things to be perfect. But they’re only perfect if she makes them perfect. I have to be perfect, and if you want to be with me, you have to be perfect.”

I had never been considered perfect. I had never even come close. I supposed that now I would find out what perfection felt like, although right now it felt like nervous anxiety. I took her hand and kissed it, and then looked around my new studio.

29: REUNION

Nikki

Diego's new studio was like his own museum. I set the Monopoly board down on the table and then walked around, looking at all his completed pieces which were now displayed on the walls. Each painting captured their respective moods, the rain drops on an overcast day, the steam of humidity on a sweltering summer afternoon, and of course, there was the island, represented by several paintings that reminded me of that week where everything had been as perfect as could be, or at least as perfect as possible with Nelli around.

She was everywhere as well. A painting of her on the beach caught my attention and I stood before it, with my arms crossed, weighing in on the artistic merit of her frolicking on the beach in a bikini.

"It's like you've made it," Elvis pointed out. "You've got the big gallery and the investors. It's insane."

I turned to see Diego pouring us soda from a two-liter bottle, and thought it was weird that he avoided Elvis' observation. He handed Elvis his soda and I walked over to get mine.

"It really is nice," I reassured him. "How do you like it?"

"I'm still getting used to how big it is, and how furnished."

It was true. He had his futon, but there was now a dresser, a table, an open kitchen, and couches for relaxation. It was like the ultimate gallery party hang out. Elvis opened the game box and began setting it up.

"What time is Nelli going to be here?" I asked.

“She said she’d come right after her dance class.”

“Cool,” I said. I sat down at the table, placing the property cards in order so we could easily identify them. Diego was looking at me. I could feel him looking at me, but I didn’t look up or acknowledge it. He wanted to know what I was up to. He wanted to know why I had insisted on us playing Monopoly with Nelli.

“Hey, I saw Nelli’s video on BET the other day,” Elvis said. Diego sat down and drank some of his soda.

“Yeah? What’d you think of it?”

“She looked hot,” Elvis said. Diego smiled because something about the way Elvis said that was funny.

“It was a crazy day,” he offered.

I decided to offer my opinion as well. “Her dress in the club scene was amazing. Did she get to keep it?”

Diego seemed to hesitate at this question, but he was still smiling as he tried to figure out how to answer that question. It seemed like a simple yes or no would’ve sufficed. “I think she had to give everything back,” he finally said.

“The song is good too,” Elvis added. “So since you’re dating her, I’m just going to flat out ask you this. You wouldn’t happen to think that maybe you could slip my demo to her could you?”

That sounded like a great idea, except for the part where Elvis didn’t really want to do this for a living. However, I knew it wasn’t that easy for him, and I knew that he was still intent on making his mom happy, so I helped the cause. “That sounds like a great idea. We should’ve thought of that before.”

“Is that why you wanted her here?” Diego then asked me. I was so insulted by the accusation that my face instantly turned sour.

“I think you know me better than that,” I replied, trying to keep my cool.

“I totally just sprung that on you,” Elvis intervened. “Nikki, didn’t know I was going to ask. I’ve been debating asking you for a couple of weeks now but it’s never really come up in conversation.”

I loved Elvis. Loved, loved, loved him. Diego seemed thoughtful and then told Elvis, “Why don’t you just ask her about it yourself when she gets here?”

“Um...” Elvis said and I filled in the blanks.

“Hello,” I said to Diego, now copping an attitude. He had really upset me. “Has Elvis ever been able to really speak around her? Why won’t you ask her? Don’t you want to see Elvis succeed?”

“You don’t understand,” Diego said.

The door opened and I turned to see Nelli come in as she pulled out her key. *Her* key. She had a key. Okay.

“I tried to get here as quick as possible,” she said putting her things down next to the futon and then coming to the table. She didn’t seem to be nervous, but there definitely was a sudden tension in the room. She kissed Diego hello and then sat down in the remaining chair, which happened to face me.

“Hey, Nelli,” I said as I put on a smile. She put one on as well.

“Hey, Nikki.”

“Let me get you something to drink,” Diego offered as he got up from the table. She thanked him, and he got her some water, and she thanked him again, and then drank some.

“I guess we should get started,” Elvis said. We all picked our pieces and began playing. We kept conversation to a minimal series of commands or requests: “Pass me the dice please.” “Can you move my hat to Park Place?” “How much is the rent?” and so on, and played the game at a steady pace as we quickly were able to purchase the majority of the properties.

Diego ordered pizza at some point, and it arrived just as I put a house on each of my properties. We decided to take a break from playing to eat, and we all sat around on the couches, eating in relative silence. I finally decided to cut through the tension as best as I could.

Nelli

I was picking at my slice of cheese pizza when Nikki said, “So we saw your video.” I smiled politely at her and Elvis and asked them what they thought.

“Elvis thought you were hot,” Diego said. I let out a soft breath that was half a sigh and half laughter.

“That’s nice of you,” I told Elvis.

“Nikki wanted your club dress,” Elvis then said and Nikki nodded.

“It was a hot dress. I was asking Diego before you got here if you got to keep it.”

“No, I had to give it back,” I let her know. When Diego had told me that Nikki had called and wanted to do Monopoly night, I naturally assumed that she had finally decided to take action and try and get him back. Interrupting what would’ve been a nice night alone for us was definitely a step in that

direction. I didn't mind, however. I'd have other opportunities, and I had been curious to see her again anyway.

"That sucks," she said. "Hey, by the way, Elvis finished recording his demo. Do you think you could get your dad to listen to it?"

I had not been expecting that. "Sure," I said. "Although I can't guarantee you anything. He gets hundreds of demos a week and out of all of them, there may only be one he's interested in. I don't really get too involved with his work like that."

"Thanks a lot," Elvis said. He reached into his backpack to pull out the CD. "I know it's a long shot, but you're the closest I've ever had to an actual 'in' you know?" He handed it to me, and I took it from him.

"Yeah, it's not a problem." I got up to place it in my purse.

"This is really nice of you," Nikki said to me. I sat back down next to Diego and drank more of my water, not caring to finish the slice of pizza that I had started.

"It's the least I can do for one of Diego's friends," I let her know. Diego had fallen even quieter if possible, and he grabbed my slice knowing I wouldn't finish it.

"So you just got out of dance class," Nikki said. "Brushing up for the next video?"

Diego tossed a glance at Nikki as if trying to assess if she was being catty or not. I couldn't tell myself. "I've always danced. I'm working on a piece for the recital in May."

"I bet you're a great dancer," Elvis said.

"I don't know about great, but I think I do pretty well."

"I'm sure you do," Nikki said and then she looked as if she remembered something. "Oh," she said, "before I forget." She reached into her purse and pulled out what looked like a charm on a chain. "I think you should have this."

She handed me the charm, and I reached out to grab it when Diego caught my wrist. I looked at him to see him glaring at Nikki.

"What are you doing?" he asked her.

"I'm giving her a present."

"I gave that to you."

"I know. But it no longer applies. However, it does apply to the two of you, and I think Nelli should have it. As a present. I never really got to congratulate the two of you on your status as a couple."

This was interesting. I pried my wrist from Diego's grip and grabbed the charm, looking it over and noticing the D + N inscription.

"I thought it would match well with the frame I had to give back to you," Nikki then added. I looked over at her and tried to read the malice and jealousy behind her eyes, but she had a good poker face and continued to display her too sweet smile.

"It's really pretty," I told her, "but I think I like mine better." I pulled out my very own charm from under my shirt, the D & N on a platinum heart with a tiny diamond in the middle. I saw her smile waiver, but she didn't lose it, and I gave her credit for that. "So maybe you should hold onto this."

It was Diego who took it from my hand though, and he looked at the charm and then glared at Nikki. "Why would you do this?"

"Do what?" Nikki asked. "Getting rid of things I no longer need?"

"By throwing it in someone else's face? By using it to hurt someone?"

"Whatever, she has one of her own. How'd you get the money for it? Or did she buy it for herself?"

I felt a little self-conscious as I kept my fingers around my own charm. Diego suddenly stood up, forming a tight fist around the charm. I had never seen him get this upset about anything.

"What is wrong with you?" he asked her. "Is this why you wanted to come over here? To make a scene and make sure I saw you get rid of this? This isn't like you."

Nikki looked hurt, but she stood up from where she was sitting to defend herself. "This isn't like me? Why don't we talk about what's not like you? Platinum charms are not like you. Your expensive clothes aren't like you. This studio is not like you. The boy who gave me that charm didn't care about material things, or showcasing his artwork for the world to see. The boy who gave me that charm was thoughtful, and kind, and he put it on a drawing and surprised me with it. Where's that boy, Diego?"

I wanted Diego to slap her if at all possible. Nikki was obviously crazy. Instead he shook his head at her and said, "I haven't changed, Nikki. That boy is still right here. And you're right, this charm did mean something, but obviously the fact that you can use it like this to throw in other people's faces just shows that it didn't mean anything to you."

"That's not fair," she said. I looked at Diego wondering what exactly he had meant by that. Nikki continued, "That charm meant the world to me. You meant the world to me. You know that I never expected a lot from you. You know that any little thing that you did made me happy. I can't believe

this.” Nikki passed a frustrated hand through her hair. “You never had to work hard with me, but you have to work so hard for her, and you do it and still yell at me for something as small as this?”

“This wasn’t small,” Diego snapped at her. “You were always great with giving me exactly what I wanted, and I knew that this is what you wanted. It was something you could keep with you at all times to look at, to show off, to carry, and to have by your heart at all times. This charm represented everything that was perfect about our relationship. How simple it was. How straightforward. It didn’t need to be big, or bright, or shiny, or flashy, because it was pure. I guess I just didn’t realize that you didn’t see it the same way.”

I couldn’t believe I was hearing this. I couldn’t believe he would say this in front of me, and I realized that he had forgotten I was in the room. To him there was only Nikki right at that moment. I felt very nauseous.

“I did,” Nikki said softly. “I just didn’t think you felt that way.” They looked at each other in silence for only a moment before Nikki said, “I need to go.”

Diego said nothing.

Nikki and Elvis collected their things and left. I watched Diego as he remained in the spot where he had been standing, and then he finally turned and looked at me. I got up from the couch and went over to my bag.

“Don’t,” he said. I stopped and looked at him. His face was red and his eyes seemed dull and unfocused. “I’m going for a walk.”

“Do what you have to do,” I said. I watched him leave, and then I grabbed my bag and tried to reign in my own emotions. I totally hated Nikki right at that moment.

Nikki

I felt like I was having a panic attack. I had walked three blocks south, and two blocks east, and two more blocks south, just so we could stand at a bus stop that was nowhere near Diego’s studio. “I can’t believe I did that,” I said as I paced back and forth and waited for the Metro. “I was supposed to be so much more in control than that. I was supposed to play it cool. I completely messed up.”

“Hi,” Elvis said to the lady waiting at the bus stop with us. She looked at me like I was crazy. “Nik, you really need to calm down.”

"I blew it. Did you see the way he looked at me? He hates me."

"He doesn't hate you."

"He hates me." Why did I do that? I knew why. Her smug little attitude, the way she was with him, the way she sat next to him, and if I was honest with myself, I could even admit that it all began with the key. "She had a key."

"It makes sense," Elvis said.

"I don't want it to make sense," I snapped. "I thought I was ready for this."

"The first time was bound to be the hardest. Why did you give her the charm though?"

I finally sat beside Elvis and dropped my head into my hands.

"I don't know. I just hated how comfortable she was with him. And then with her sitting there next to him where I should've been sitting. Oh my God," I lamented. "This was supposed to be the first step in me having been completely moved on. I'm never moving on. I can't handle this." I began crying, not because I was feeling pity for myself, but because I was so frustrated.

"Shh," Elvis said as he rubbed my back. "It's okay. It's all going to be okay."

"I'm just so tired of this," I said as my tears poured. "I really thought I could do this. I really did."

"I know."

"I want him back so bad."

"I know."

I continued to cry and Elvis continued to rub my back, and when the bus finally arrived, I got to my feet and forced myself to get onto it.

Diego

I arrived home to an empty house. I threw my keys onto the kitchen counter and looked in the fridge for something to eat. I pulled out some cold cuts and mayonnaise so that I could make myself a sandwich, and once I had assembled it to my liking, I leaned against the counter and began eating. I put my hand in my jeans pocket and pulled out the charm. It looked so dim and cheap compared to the one that Nelli had, but Nelli had bought hers without me even knowing about it until she showed it off to me as a surprise.

When I had bought the charm for Nikki, I knew that what she really wanted was the drawing, but I thought the drawing didn't really represent what I felt for her, so I got her the charm to go with it. Nikki had never been obsessed with me drawing her until I began drawing Nelli, and I had hoped the drawing, along with the charm would quell whatever it was that was bothering her. It had only done so temporarily.

My cell phone rang and I finished my sandwich and reached over to pick it up. I looked at the display and saw that it was Nikki. I considered not picking it up, but knew that it would be stupid of me not to.

"Hey," I said.

"I'm sorry," she said. "I was out of line."

I turned the light off in the kitchen and walked out.

"Why did you do that though? The real reason." She was quiet for a moment, but I knew she would answer. I went into my room and turned on the light, then sat on my bed and took off my sneakers. I got out of my jeans and took off my shirt, then turned off the light in my room and got into bed. "You still there?" I asked her.

"Yeah," she said. "I just got into bed."

"Me too," I said as I felt on my comforter for where I had dropped the charm. My fingertips found it and I played with it.

"Are you still mad at me?" she asked.

"No," I told her. I could never stay mad at her for long, and this was the first time I had ever been that mad at her to begin with. I wasn't even sure that mad was the right word for it. Maybe just annoyed and disappointed. "But you need to answer my question."

"I didn't think it would be so hard. I thought I had gotten over you enough to be able to see the two of you together, but maybe it was the shock of it. And she had a key. I think it was the key that did it."

"I gave her the spare so that she could hide out there whenever she needed to get away," I said. It had been my idea, but Nelli had been grateful for it.

"Get away from what?"

"Everything. Her life. Her mom's expectations."

Nikki fell silent again, but I could hear her soft breaths on the phone, as if she was trying to say something, but wanted to make sure she chose the right words.

"When I told you to give her Elvis' demo, and you said you wouldn't, and I asked you why, and you said I don't understand, what did you mean?"

“Everyone always wants something from her. Her friends are only her friends because of what they can get out of it. I don’t do that to her, and I never will. I feel guilty enough for the things she buys me, or the things we do together, or even the studio. I make it a point to never ask her for favors because that’s not what our relationship is about. I want her to have someone in her life who can be a real friend to her, who can like her for who she is, not what she can provide.”

She was silent again, but after a few moments passed she said, “I understand that. I’m sorry I put you in that position. I didn’t know.”

“It’s okay. How could you? I mean, it’s not like I ever talk about her to you.”

I closed my fist around the charm and wondered what she was thinking. If Nikki was still the Nikki I knew, then she was thinking about how our friendship had changed and about how we now censored our topics when we spoke. It was weird how Mr. Alvarez had been right. It really wasn’t the same.

“That’s a good point,” she said softly. “I’m sorry I’ve been a sucky friend to you these past few months.”

“You haven’t been. You’re a great friend, Nikki. A really great friend. It’s just different.”

“I hate different,” she said. “But I’m trying to get used to it. Do you ever wish things could be how they used to be?”

All the time. “Yeah.”

“Me too,” she said. “There’s a lot I would do over if I got the chance.”

“Me too,” I said.

“I wouldn’t have given up so easily. I wouldn’t have just let you go.”

“I would’ve visited you at your work and gotten lots of bagels,” I admitted.

“I wouldn’t have let you go to her party.”

“I wouldn’t have agreed to go to the island.”

We fell quiet again, and my heart beat fast at the confessions I had made. I knew the safe thing to do was hang up right at this moment, but I couldn’t. I listened to her breathe, and then I listened to her say, “I wish we were still together.”

I was scared to reply, so I just lay there for a while. I drifted off to sleep while holding the charm in my hand.

30: WHAT BILLY KNOWS

Nikki

I called Nelli and said, “We should talk. How about the mall?” I suggested the mall because it was safe and familiar territory for the both of us. We needed to talk because Diego was my friend, and Nelli was his girlfriend, and I had disrespected her. I wasn’t sure what I was hoping to accomplish, and I wasn’t sure what would come out of this, but I knew it had to be done.

We didn’t get a chance to meet up until the weekend, which was fine. At school, Diego would ask me if this was something I really wanted to do, and how much I didn’t have to do it. I think he was worried that I would push her in front of a moving car or something, but I tried to explain to him that, as his ex and as his girlfriend, there were things we needed to talk about.

I met Nelli in the food court and noticed that we both had shades on. Hers may have been more expensive, but mine were way cuter. We gave each other a once over and then I asked her which store we should start at. I let her pick first because I wanted to get an idea of how she was going to act on this trip. She picked a store that we both liked. Interesting.

We walked together through the mall, not speaking, and keeping a respectable distance between us as we walked side-by-side. The mall was lively, loud, and littered with people. We walked into the store and rummaged through the racks, looking at the selection and picking out things to try on. When we had both assembled an armload of items, we went to the dressing room. I tried on a cute shirt over a pair of flowy pants. It looked

pretty nice, a little more mature than I normally went for, but maybe it was time to go a bit more mature. I came out of the dressing room just as Nelli did, and when I saw her in the floral skirt and pink shirt she had picked out, I gushed.

“I love that,” I said just as she said the same thing to me. Somehow, adoring the other’s choice in clothing seemed to break the ice. We traded clothes, mixed and matched, and drove the store staff insane with our requests for different colors and alternate styles. We both ended up walking out of there with two bags and a determination to hit up every store we could.

Diego

After hanging out at Billy’s for some lunch and basketball, he became curious about my new studio. So he drove us over so he could check it out and put his stamp of approval on it. I went to take a shower, and when I came out, Billy was pointing at the painting of Nelli on the beach.

“This the girlfriend?”

“Yeah,” I said as I towel dried my hair and walked to the kitchen area. “Do you want something to drink? I have soda or water.”

“Water’s good,” Billy said. He looked at the painting again. I poured him some water and brought it over to him. “Dude, she’s hot,” he said before taking a drink.

“I know,” I said. I remembered that day vividly. She had been in one of her crazier moods, wanting to bother me with kisses while dancing in the water. All I had wanted to do was sit and recreate the scene on a canvas.

“She got an older sister?”

“No.”

“I can’t believe you’ve found yourself a sugar mama.”

“It’s not like that.”

Billy would be the one to say something like that. He barely made money as a freelance writer. He would love it if he found someone who paid all his bills while he did what he loved.

“No?” Billy looked around the studio. “It sure seems that way.”

I didn’t like that analysis, but I couldn’t blame him for thinking what he did. I crossed my arms and looked past him at the painting of Nelli on the beach.

“It’s complicated,” I said.

“Why don’t you tell me how it’s complicated?”

I wondered why he wanted to know, but I didn’t feel like talking about it anyway.

“It just is.”

Billy accepted this for the moment and instead asked me, “How does your mom feel about all this?”

That was a harder question to answer. I just shrugged.

“Has she seen this place yet?”

Like she had the time to?

“Of course not,” I said.

Billy raised his eyebrows and nodded as if he should’ve known. He looked at the painting of Vizcaya that I was working on. It was the one based off my sketch from the boat. “I think it’s crazy how talented you are. The way you just create an image from nothing. You get it from our great grandfather. Did you know that?”

I froze in my spot. No, how would I know that? “I always assumed I got it from my dad.”

“Maybe you did,” Billy clarified, “but I’ve been doing some digging into our family history. I’ve been working on pulling some good stories together for a novel. You know how cultural stories are always the ‘in’ thing.” He seemed a little bitter about this, but he continued, “It turns out our great grandfather was an artist for the military.”

“For the military? What does that mean? While other people went out to fight in battle, he just sat around and drew stuff?”

“Who knows? I guess someone had to stay back and draw the propaganda.”

“Maybe he drew the maps they used.” I bet that would’ve been kind of cool.

“Maybe. There wasn’t any real way for me to find out what art he did.”

He drank his water. I looked at him wanting to know more. I was curious about what Billy knew considering he liked to ask people things so he could find inspiration for good stories to write.

I took a deep breath and asked, “Did your mom ever talk to you about my mom in relation to her time with my dad?”

Billy groaned. “Man, I knew this day would come.”

“Mom won’t tell me anything about him. All I have is a name. And I think I look like him.”

“You do,” Billy said. He motioned for me to follow him to the couches. Now I was worried. Why did this require a sit down session? I sat across from him and looked at him both nervous and excited. “Your mom’s going to hate that I told you this, but I think you’re old enough to know. I mean you asked right?”

Why did I have a feeling I was going to learn something else about my mom that I didn’t want to know? I urged him to continue.

“Keep in mind that this is the story I got from my mom, so it’s a bit one sided. You’ll probably want to ask your mom to clarify anything that seems off. Although I did ask *abuela* a bit about the situation too, and she filled in some of the blanks.”

“Just get to it.” I motioned for him to hurry it up.

“According to my mom, your dad was in love with my mom, and she was in love with him.”

My stomach sank. So Chris wasn’t the first guy my mom had had an affair with? Great. I sucked in my bottom lip as I listened.

“Now, she claims that your mom seduced him away from her, but *abuela* says that he was two timing them knowingly, and *abuela* thinks that the girls knew about it and were in competition. Obviously when your mom ended up pregnant with you, she felt she had won.”

Somehow that seemed less awful than where I thought he had been going with it.

“So then what happened?” I asked.

“Well considering he was like in his early twenties at the time, and your mom was still in high school, *abuelo* threatened to kill him. My mom was still in love with him, so she tried to convince him to take her and me with him. She wanted to get married to him and for the three of us to have this great family together, but he had had enough of our crazy family, so he bolted. No one ever heard from him again.”

“How old were you when this happened?” It was so weird to think that Billy had once known the man responsible for my existence.

“I was like six or seven,” he did the math in his head. “Yeah, seven. I wasn’t really aware of the drama that was going on. I just knew that he’d be at the apartment a lot, and he always asked me how I was doing. Sometimes he would bring me toys or candy, and whenever I asked him to play cars with me he would always be more than happy to.” Billy looked at me. I stayed quiet as I processed this. “He was a nice guy, D.”

“A nice guy who hooked up with a high school girl?”

“It sounds more salacious than it is. She was a senior. She was looking to get out of there anyway. And as a twenty-something, I can tell you that just because I’m this old, it doesn’t mean I think I’m this old. I think my mom, and your mom, and your dad were three people just trying to figure life out. They just kept falling in and out of love in the process.”

“Okay, but that still doesn’t make him nice. A nice guy wouldn’t have just left his kid.”

Billy stared at me until I was forced to look him back in the eyes.

“You want to hate him,” he said. “I understand that. You have every right to hate him. My mom hates him because she never got over him. Your mom hates him because he didn’t stay with her. I don’t tend to hate him because my memories of the guy were always good. Yeah, I hate him on mom’s behalf, but at the end of the day, he was still a nice guy. If he had stuck around, he would’ve been a good dad to you because he did a pretty good job with me and he didn’t even have to. Maybe that makes this all worse, knowing that he would’ve been good to have around, but he left for a reason. You are who you are today because he wasn’t around, and that’s all there is to it. Life is about moving forward, D. Not about looking back.”

I sat quiet for a while after this, just trying to process it all. Billy was good about getting up to look at my artwork again so that I could have some time to think it all through. My mom seemed pretty destined to never have any guy she wanted, but why did she keep going after guys that were already taken? I suddenly was more worried about her than I had been previously. To make matters worse, my dad had been caught up in a love triangle between two sisters, and it drove him crazy to the point that he had to leave. I wondered if he had hung around long enough to see me if he would have changed his mind and stuck it out. Then, as often happened when I thought about him, I wondered where he had run off to and if he had a family now. What if I had brothers and sisters I didn’t know about? What if they looked like me?

“Do you think he ever thinks about me?” I asked. Billy was looking at the Vizcaya painting again.

“Yeah. I do,” Billy said. He turned to look at me. “I think he probably even regrets not having stuck around for you.”

“Do you think it’s weird that if he had stuck around and married your mom, we would technically be brothers?”

Billy laughed at me and came back over to sit down on the couch again. “I think it would’ve been appropriate. We’ve always been more like brothers than cousins anyway.”

“That’s true,” I admitted. Long before I had met Nikki, it was Billy who would be at my side in all my birthday pictures. “I’m really worried about my mom,” I confessed to him.

“So is my mom, go figure. Is she still with Chris?”

“Yeah. What do you know about her and Chris?”

Billy hesitated. “Uh, I think I have to plead the fifth on that one.”

“I know he’s married.”

Billy looked both sorry and relieved to hear it from me. “Yeah, it’s a tricky situation.”

“I don’t want her with him.”

“I don’t blame you, kid.” Billy picked up his water again. “Look, your mom loves you. That’s all that should matter. At the end of the day, she’s your mom, and that’s all she ever has to be to you.”

I supposed that Billy was right, but all this new information and my mom’s current situation just made me feel on edge. Billy switched the subject and made me talk about my art, and I had a feeling it was because Billy had met his quota of seriousness for the day. I still couldn’t believe that he had known my dad and had had a glimpse into the life that I would’ve had if the man had stuck around.

Nelli

We sat in the food court where I ate my salad while Nikki ate a sandwich. We were surrounded by bags, and now that the shopping excursion was at a standstill, I knew what was about to come next. I waited for her to start, and she seemed like she was going to avoid it for as long as she could. I opened my bottle of water and took a long drink, then decided to go ahead with it instead.

“So, I guess we should talk.”

“Yeah,” Nikki said. She put her sandwich down and closed her eyes as if she could make the conversation happen without her having to physically take part in it. “I thought I was going to be able to hang out with you guys and see you guys together, but it was harder than I thought. It really hurt actually. In fact, a lot of what happened really hurt. It hurt that you were suddenly

more interesting to him than I was, and it hurt that you kept setting up ways to get his attention on you alone, and it hurt that you used my time working to steal him away from me.”

“You broke up with him,” I reminded her.

“I had to. I knew where this was all headed. But you still stole him, and you know it.”

“I didn’t steal him. You let him go and I was there to catch him.”

“Your rationalization might work on your friends, but you can’t try and pull one over on me. Do you think that I didn’t know what you were up to when you invited him to the island? You’re used to getting what you want, and you saw him, and you wanted him, and you were going to do everything you had to do to get him. My only chance was Diego. He had to be the one to resist you and tell you to go away, but he didn’t, and he wasn’t going to. I did what I thought I had to do before I got hurt worse than I could handle. As it is, I got hurt more than I imagined.”

“You could’ve fought for him.”

“I don’t play games.”

“Right. That’s why you pulled out that charm.”

Nikki looked upset, and I recognized it as a look that meant she was upset with herself.

“I’ve never done anything like that,” she said. “I’ve never been that type of person. I still don’t know why I did that, but I had never done anything like that, and I definitely would never do something like that again.”

I didn’t believe her. “So then what do you call this?” I asked, referring to this shopping trip she had set up.

“This is my olive branch,” she told me point blank. “Diego is a good friend of mine, and that means that I have to accept you because I respect him and I want what’s best for him. If that’s you, then I’m willing to give you a chance and be nice to you. I owe that to him. If you really care about him like that, then you deserve it.”

I couldn’t deny her feelings for him. She was willing to be nice to me, and form a truce, just to make him happy. But I still didn’t trust her, especially after the two had pretty much engaged in a lover’s quarrel right in front of me.

“Okay, we’ll be nice to each other.” Whatever she had been expecting me to say, that wasn’t it, and she hesitated before giving me a small smile.

“Okay, great. So I guess we should try Monopoly night again?”

“Yeah, it’ll be fun.”

“Cool,” she said. She picked up her sandwich again. “Oh, and hey, sorry about springing Elvis’ demo on you. You don’t have to give it to your dad if you don’t want.”

“Oh no, it’s no big deal,” I told her. I mixed my salad around some more trying to find the good pieces of chicken. “Elvis is nice. I don’t mind doing that for him.” I found a decent piece and ate it.

“Yeah, but, you really shouldn’t.”

“Why not?”

“Elvis doesn’t want to be a singer like that. It’s his mom’s dream, not his. He does it because it’s what she wants, but all he wants to do is be a professional photographer.”

I had sensed that from Elvis before, but it was all the much sadder when it was actually told to me in this way.

“I understand him,” I told her. “But unlike Elvis, I’ve never found anything else that I really want to do so I just do what my mom wants. I wish I had another hobby or interest.”

“Have you ever tried doing anything else?”

“Like what?”

“I don’t know. But like I just discovered that I think I want to be an engineer or something like that. I joined the math and science clubs at school and they’re a lot of fun.” I looked concerned for her and she chuckled and nodded. “Yes, I’m a nerd.”

“No that’s cool,” I covered. “I don’t think that kind of thing is up my alley. The only thing that I think would be kind of cool is being a lawyer, but I don’t think Mami would like it very much if I gave up acting for law.”

“That’s weird of your mom,” she said, but she hadn’t been the first to point that out. I just shrugged and ate more of my salad. “Well I’m going to tell you the same thing I told Elvis. You shouldn’t live out your mom’s dreams. You should live out your own. Your mom will accept you no matter what. Sure, she may be mad at first if you go off to law school instead of Hollywood, but she would eventually get over it, and then she’d be proud of you.”

“What makes you so sure of that?” I asked her. I really wanted to know. I was pretty sure that Mami would disown me, and then she and Papi would have the kind of fight that couples didn’t recover from.

“Because I can’t imagine how your mom, or Elvis’ mom, couldn’t be supportive of you guys. Elvis is such a talented photographer, and you’re smart and know how to get what you want. I mean you’d be a great lawyer.”

“Does your mom support everything you want to do?”

“Yeah. 100%.”

I knew that would be her answer before she even answered.

“We’re not all lucky enough to have moms like yours.”

She dismissed this observation and became more fired up about the subject.

“But at some point,” Nikki argued, “don’t you have to stand up for what you want? Don’t you have to be the one to decide what you want your life to be? I mean, I get Elvis to a certain extent. He and his mom only have each other, but that’s not your situation. Your mom has your dad. She’ll be alright if you choose to do your own thing. Right?”

I tried to think of a way to make her understand. Sure, if you laid it out on the table like that, it seemed like there were options. But it wasn’t about the options, it was about the consequences.

“Do you like seeing your mom upset at you?” I asked her. “Or disappointed in you? Or like you’ve failed at something that she knew you would succeed at? Do you like it when you know that you’re the reason your mom is unhappy or mad.” I knew she didn’t, because I knew that Nikki was the perfect daughter. “Not everyone has an easy time making their parents proud of them, but we all try, and we do what we can. Mami’s expectations may be higher than most parents, but that doesn’t change that I have to try and meet them. Just like it doesn’t change that Elvis has to try and meet those of his mom. And I understand that, and I’ll help him, and that’s all there is to it.”

Nikki didn’t like my answer, but she had no response to it. She put her sandwich down again and focused on drinking her soda instead.

Then she said, “I just hope that whatever you guys end up doing, you end up happy.”

I smirked a little. “You want me to be happy?”

Nikki smiled because if she really thought about it, that couldn’t have been what she meant. “I want everyone to be happy. I want you to be happy because that makes Diego happy. Fair enough?”

“Fair enough,” I said. We fell silent as we finished our food.

I wondered what it would be like to have been born with Nikki’s mom instead. I wondered how different I would be if my mom had just let me naturally find what I was good at and what I wanted to do. Nikki knew herself so well, and she was confident in her abilities. I wasn’t confident in

any of mine. The only thing I was confident about was that I could get what I wanted because of how I looked.

Nikki had it easy. Sure I had won Diego and she had lost him, but she still got to go back home to a mom who believed in her, not her looks. And she had a friend like Elvis who would always be there for her. Nikki got to go home and relax and not stress about things like auditions, and perfect grades, and perfect appearances. Maybe I had done her a favor by stealing Diego from her. No one should have it that easy.

Diego

I'm sure Mr. Alvarez was not expecting me at his door. And he definitely wasn't expecting me to voluntarily ask if it was alright to talk to him about something. His wife hugged me when she saw me and said she would heat up some leftovers. I told her she didn't have to, but she waved me off like I was silly. I followed Mr. Alvarez to the living room where he had been watching a basketball game. He turned it off and told me to make myself at home.

"So what's on your mind?" he asked me. His wife brought us both some café con leche which I couldn't thank her enough for.

"I'm worried about my mom," I told him.

Mr. Alvarez looked concerned. "What's wrong? Is she in trouble?"

"It's complicated," I said. I didn't know why I had come to him, but I had to talk to someone who could make everything seem better. Even though I didn't like what he had told me about where Nikki and I's friendship would go, in the end he had been right. I needed him to be right again because I needed to know where this was all going.

"If it wasn't, it wouldn't be worth talking about. Tell me what's wrong."

So I told him. I told him the truth about my mom and Chris, and what I found out today about my dad and my mom, and then I told him about how he had been right about Nikki and me. I even told him about the charm and the Monopoly game, and when I finished, I felt like I had taken all of my burdens and thrown them into a very large well. Now they bobbed at the bottom waiting for me to pull them back out.

"You've had a lot on your mind," Mr. Alvarez observed as he put his coffee down on the table. He gave me his undivided attention as he spoke. "It's important that you realize something, Diego. Your mom has worked

hard to give you a good life. She's provided a home for you, and clothes, and food. She'd give her life for you. In that respect, she is a good mom. But sometimes, good moms aren't necessarily good at other things. Just because you become a parent doesn't mean you stop being who you are. You still have your issues and your baggage. Especially when you're still a young woman. Your mom is how old? Thirty-three? Thirty-four?"

I confirmed this for him. "Thirty-four."

"She's still a young woman. A woman that still has her whole life ahead of her, and already she's accomplished something great. Already she's raised a good teenage boy. Now that you're getting ready to live your own life, she still has to figure out how to live hers. There's a lot she probably put off. She put off taking risks because it was better for you that she went with what would bring her security. She chose a man, who yes was taken, but he was also a man who could provide. He was able to help with the bills and the other things that she worried about day-to-day so that you would be taken care of. She did everything she could to give you the family she thought you deserved, but it didn't work out how she wanted. That's not your burden to carry, it's hers."

"But she deserves better," I argued.

"Yes, everyone deserves better. Your mother doesn't want you to worry about her, and she doesn't want you to suffer because of her mistakes. We all make them. Just imagine for a moment that you were suddenly a father. Right now, in your current situation. Would that change any of the predicaments you were in? What would you do for your child? Would you run like your father did? Or would you stay and do what you could to provide for your family? What would you risk? And what happiness would you give up for the happiness of your child? These are the decisions your mother had to make. She could've run too, Diego. She could've given you up for adoption, or left you with her sister, or her parents. After all she's done for you, do you think she wants you to be worried about her? Or do you think she wants you to understand her and love her unconditionally and support her through everything?"

I started to understand what Mr. Alvarez was saying. It was as if I was judging my mother under the guise of being concerned.

"I do love her unconditionally, and I do want to support her," I said.

"The first step into adulthood is realizing that your parents are just like you," he said with a knowing smile. "You can be honest with your mother, but be aware of your intentions. This woman deserves your respect at all

times. Even when you're telling her what you think and how you feel about things."

"You're right," I said.

"As for your father, I personally have an issue understanding men who run from their responsibilities. But you can't judge unless you've walked in that man's shoes. Do you know which you would do? Would you stay or would you run?"

I knew the answer was that I would stay. After everything I'd been through, and my mom had been through, I couldn't imagine just running away from a responsibility like that. If something like that were to happen with me and Nelli, I'm pretty sure her mom would force her to have an abortion and I wouldn't have a say about it. If it happened with me and Nikki, though, Nikki would take full responsibility and I would have no choice but to step up to the plate and be the person that I would have to be for her and the baby.

"What a weird question," I said as my mind drifted to these possibilities. "I've never thought about anything like that."

"Because it's scary," Mr. Alvarez said. "The two scariest words for a man are marriage and pregnant."

I laughed because he was so right.

"Why did you get married?" I asked him. "Did you want to or was it something else?"

"I certainly didn't want to," Mr. Alvarez said. "I was very scared, but I knew that she wanted to get married. I wanted to make her happy so I asked her. We've been married for a very long time. Three children and six grandchildren later, we're still the same as we were then. A lot of people can't say that after this many years of marriage."

"It's because you married your best friend isn't it?" I put my coffee cup down, not wanting to see his eyes as he answered the question.

"It's because I married someone that respected me as much as I respected her. And it didn't hurt that she was also my best friend. But, you know, marriage isn't for everyone. And certainly not at your age. You have time to figure these things out. You have time to go through as many friends as you like and see what it is you're really looking for. One man's life is not meant to be followed as if a demonstration of how things should be. It should just be viewed as an example of what could be, just a mere possibility out of an infinite amount of options. You have to decide what's right for your life. Which brings us back to your mom. She decided what was right for her life,

and it may not be what people think is right, but who are they to decide? Only your mother has walked in her own shoes.”

I knew Mr. Alvarez was right again. I got up from the couch and went to the one he was on. I sat down beside him and gave him a huge hug. He probably wasn't expecting it, and he probably thought it was weird, but I didn't care. He was the closest I'd ever had to a dad, and right now I wanted him to know that I appreciated everything he had done for me and my mom. Because even I knew that Mr. Alvarez didn't have to come over and check up on me, or bring me food, or make sure that the house was okay when neither of us were there. But he did these things because he worried about us, and he worried about us without judging us.

Nelli

I probably should have called Diego to warn him that I was coming by, but I hadn't expected him to be out. I was about to send him a text asking him where he was when I noticed him walking over from his neighbor's house. He held a plate of wrapped food and looked a little unsure of seeing me.

“I see you and Nikki didn't kill each other at the mall,” he said.

“We did pretty alright,” I told him. “I don't trust her though.”

“That's okay,” Diego said as he opened the door, “she doesn't trust you either.”

He let me walk in first. I put my keys down on the kitchen counter as he unwrapped the food and grabbed a fork.

“Want some?” he asked. I shook my head. He took a bite of the rice on the plate and looked at me. “So are you going to tell me how it went?”

“Are we ever going to talk about what happened that night?” We had yet to talk about the charm or anything related to it, and I had a feeling that it was because Diego didn't want to admit that he still had feelings for Nikki.

“What's to talk about? She made a mistake.”

“And what about you?”

He stopped eating and looked at me. “What do you mean?”

“I don't think you've ever given me anything that's held as much meaning as that charm did.”

“Don't compare yourself to her,” Diego said. It sounded like a warning, and that only reinforced what was going through my mind.

“Why? Because you still have feelings for her?”

Diego rubbed his forehead. I knew he liked things to be simple and he didn't care for confrontation, but if he had feelings for Nikki then I wanted to hear it from his mouth.

"Because I've known Nikki forever, and we have a lot of history. So the two situations are nothing alike and you can't compare them."

It was that shared history that I feared the most.

"Diego, do you still have feelings for her?"

He shook his head, not because the answer was no, but because he was upset with me for making him confront this issue right now.

"Nelli, why would you ask that?"

"Tell me the truth. Do you still have feelings for her?"

"It's Nikki," Diego said. "I'll always have feelings for her."

It stung, but I had been expecting it. The mere fact that Nikki had been bold enough to arrange a mall outing to confront me had just proven that she had felt the pendulum swing in her favor. I had no doubts that this was part of her plan to get Diego back.

"That doesn't mean I don't have feelings for you," Diego said. "I care about you too, Nelli."

Nikki may have had the upper hand when it came to history, but I wasn't going down without a fight. I had never lost a boy that I wanted, and I wasn't going to start now. I walked over to Diego and wrapped my arms around his waist.

"I know you do," I said looking him in the eyes, "and I care about you more than I've ever cared about anyone. You mean so much to me, Diego. I don't know how I would've coped with Mami these past few months if it wasn't for you."

"You would've," he said as he wrapped his arms around me. "You're a strong person."

"I don't feel like it."

Diego embraced me as well and placed a comforting kiss on my nose.

"You are," he assured me. "I don't know how you do half the things that you do."

I looked up at him to thank him with a smile, and then I pulled him into a kiss like I always did when I wanted to get his mind off everything else.

31: THE TALK

Nikki

I didn't care that it was my birthday. Who cared if I was seventeen now? What difference did it make how old I was when I was a week away from taking my SAT and still had no clue which colleges to report my scores to? Mrs. McCloud had given me a million bajillion brochures to every college in the state of Florida, and although I had narrowed it down to about ten, I still didn't know what I really wanted out of my college experience.

"Happy birthday," Elvis said as he walked up to me and handed me a balloon. I thanked him and hugged him, but I was still freaking out so it took me a moment to register what was on the balloon I was holding.

"Oh my God," I said.

I started laughing so hard because how the heck had he found another "Happy Tweet Day!" balloon? I was laughing too hard to tell him that I was pretty sure they had destroyed these balloons because who in their right mind would buy them?

"Happy Tweet Day?" I heard Diego say. Suddenly the boy was beside me looking at Elvis as if he was lame. "That doesn't even make sense. Here you go, Nik. This makes way more sense."

He handed me a drawing. When I looked at it, I almost did fall to the floor in laughter. Diego had drawn me a bird and the bird said, "Happy Chirp Day," to me. Okay, so maybe I did care that it was my birthday. I hugged my boys and we walked together down the hallway as if we were ready to skip to class.

Nelli

I wasn't feeling well at school so during lunch I pushed my salad away and checked my text messages instead. I knew it was Nikki's birthday and I had sent her a birthday text in the morning.

"Dude, you guys," Brody said as he sat down at our usual table. "Did you guys see John? He went skinhead again on us."

I had noticed it in first period. After the shock of seeing his blond hair gone, I instinctively had looked at his arms to see if he had carved anything on them. He had been wearing a sweatshirt so I couldn't tell.

"It was a matter of time," Ezra said. "He tends to go crazy once a year."

"Maybe we should stage an intervention before he gets to the black trench coat stage," Danielle said. She looked toward where John sat by himself.

"Leave it to John to pull a Columbine on our school," Brody said. Ezra laughed. I shut my cell phone and glared at the two of them, then got up from the table and walked over to John. I sat beside him and watched as he ate his food.

"Hey," I said, but he didn't answer me. I looked up as if asking for divine help, and then I looked around the cafeteria before looking back at John. "Look, I know that I'm not your friend and that we had a falling out, but that doesn't mean I'm not worried about you."

"Here I thought you had come over to ask me to go to prom with you. You know what I would've told you? I would've told you no. You know why? Because I don't care about you anymore. So stop pretending you care and go back to your so called friends."

His cold eyes and angry voice freaked me out, but I didn't say anything more. I left the cafeteria because I hated seeing John like that. He was purposely ostracizing himself, not just from me, but from all of his other friends.

Now I felt more nauseous than I did before, and I went to the girl's bathroom to splash some water on my face. I held the sides of the sink with my hands and took deep breaths. What was wrong with me? I heard the door open and tried to straighten up which just made me dizzy. So I held onto the sink again.

"You okay?" It was Lindsey. I must've looked bad for her to talk to me.

I couldn't answer and just tried to nod, but now I had to close my eyes shut because that wave of nausea was coming up again. I felt her stand beside

me. She rubbed my back, but I couldn't remember anything after that except for the slow motion of my body and the cold tile beneath me.

Diego

I sat in Mrs. McCloud's office wondering what I had done now. I was pretty sure she wouldn't be calling my mom ever again for a meeting. Mrs. McCloud seemed to be looking through my file on her computer. She finally addressed me.

"How are you, Diego?"

"I'm okay," I said, unsure of why she was asking. "I've been showing up on time," I went ahead and added. I really didn't understand what the problem was.

"I can see that," she said. "How are things at home?"

Was I under investigation? Was my mom? "Things are fine."

She looked at me to see if I was lying and then stopped clicking her mouse and turned her attention fully to me. "I'm glad. The reason I called you in today is because I've received many recommendations for you."

"Recommendations?"

"Your art teachers, both last semester and this semester, feel that you should take a couple of AP Art courses next year."

"AP?" Mrs. McCloud was obviously reading the wrong file. "Aren't AP classes for smart people?"

"Your teachers have written here that you are highly talented and would benefit from a more challenging class," she continued as she ignored my question. "Is this something you are interested in? I can sign off on it right now if you like."

It was strange how at that moment, I thought about how these were the kinds of meetings Nikki always had with Mrs. McCloud. Is this what it felt like to be Nikki then? What would Nikki do? "I don't know if I can be in an AP class," I told her. "I mean, I definitely like to do art, but do I have to write more papers and things like that? Because I don't know if I can really do that."

Mrs. McCloud looked back at the screen, clicked the mouse a few times, and then looked at me again. "What are you afraid of, Diego? According to your file, this isn't the first time you've been recommended for a higher level art class."

That was true. Last year had been the first time I had been able to take an art class in high school, and the art teacher had mentioned that I should skip ahead to a higher level art class. I had told him that I would think about it, but at the time, I hadn't wanted to take an art class that Nikki couldn't be in. It was our only chance to really be in class together since she was in all the smart classes and I was not. The same problem would occur next year if I agreed to take an AP art class.

"It's not that I'm afraid," I told Mrs. McCloud, "I just don't see the point. I mean, it's not like I'm even going to college or anything. It's kind of pointless for me to put in that much more effort."

"Well, if you won't put in any effort than neither will I," Mrs. McCloud said. She scribbled her name on a hall pass and handed it to me. "Sorry for wasting your time."

Now I felt like a jerk. I took the hall pass and watched as she exited out of my file and began working on something else. I left her office and walked back toward my classroom, thinking about whether or not I had made the right decision. Nikki had taken an art class last semester only for me, and together we had chosen to take photography this semester for Elvis. Maybe it was time to take a class next semester for Nikki. I had never thought about it since all the classes I hated were essentially for Nikki, but maybe there was something that I could take. And then maybe I could do this whole AP thing. Maybe.

Nikki

Sometimes, when you least expect it, the answers you're looking for show up, unannounced, and uninvited, but definitely welcomed. We had been assigned a project in our photo class to photograph abstract shapes around the school. As we walked around, a pattern began to emerge. Elvis would photograph the people we would encounter, focusing his lens on the curve of their elbow or the crook of their neck. Diego would photograph the natural shapes of the plant life he could find, zooming in on the edge of a leaf or composing shots of the pieces of bark from a palm tree. But I did not photograph those things at all.

I photographed the school itself. I photographed the archway, the triangular shape where the gutter seemed to meet the shingle, the inclines of the roof, and even the folds of the door jamb. I found that I was more than

fascinated with how all of these shapes came together, and a little more than in love with how they all relied on each other to make this structure stand and be useful.

I thought back to Vizcaya, to the villa, to how enamored I was with the villa itself, and how it made me wonder about so many things, like why everyone couldn't have their own special villa they could call their home. Then I realized the obvious. They could. They could because I could build it for them. I wanted to build everyone their own Vizcaya. I stared at our school with a big smile on my face, dreaming of how many other schools I could design and build. They too could look like a paradise if they were designed just right and with just a touch of love.

"What are you looking at?" Elvis asked me. I could tell he was a bit freaked out by my massive smile. Diego stood beside me as well, looking at Elvis for an explanation. But he didn't have one.

"I'm looking at our school."

"Okay," Elvis said. "You've taken this academic thing too far. It's okay to love school, but this is too much. I think you need a day off."

"I agree," Diego said.

I shook my head at them and breathed a content sigh before telling them, "I want to be an architect."

"Oh," Diego said.

"Carry on then," Elvis said, leaving to photograph more people.

"It makes sense," Diego said with a nod of approval, and he went back to photographing the palm frond that was on the ground.

I was so excited by this decision that I could hardly contain my excitement. When photo class was over, I ran to Mrs. McCloud's office and hugged the lady before telling her my decision. She was instantly excited as well, and we went through the ten websites of the schools that I had narrowed my list down to. Then the perfect school made itself known.

"UM," I said and my face fell a little. The University of Miami was a private school. A very expensive private school. There was no way we could afford that.

"They have a six year program that would be perfect for you," Mrs. McCloud said. "It's for a B.S. in Architectural Engineering and a Master of Architecture. When you graduate you're both an architect and an engineer."

"We can't afford it," I told her. Even if my dad contributed, I doubted we had that kind of money. Especially not for six years of college.

“You’re going to graduate at the top of your class,” Mrs. McCloud pointed out. “There will be a lot of scholarships open to you, and the school will probably give you grants. Don’t worry about the money issue. I will look into every scholarship available that you can apply for, just focus on doing well on your SAT. The higher the score, the more scholarship money you can get as well.”

I liked the sound of that. I left Mrs. McCloud’s office with the University of Miami brochure in my hands. I loved how it looked, loved the picture they used, and loved mentally saying the name of the school in my head over and over. I don’t think I had ever wanted anything more at that moment than to be accepted to that school. I hoped mom liked the idea too, and maybe she would tell me something crazy like that she had a ton of money saved up for college. I dreamt about this all through my next class.

Nelli

Mami was livid, Papi was worried, and Trace complained that it shouldn’t take this long to get my blood test results back.

“I swear to God,” Mami said as she glared at me. “I’m going to kill Diego, and then I’m going to kill you.”

“Stop it,” Papi said to her with a commanding voice. “We don’t know what’s wrong.”

“We don’t?” Mami asked back with an equally intimidating voice. “Should we go down the list of symptoms? You can stay in denial, but I think it’s best to plan a course of action.” Then Mami looked at me again. “How could you let this happen? How could you be this irresponsible?”

Normally, in a situation like this, I would’ve been crying and telling her I’m sorry. But all I could do was just look at her as if she had gone insane. I was pretty sure I wasn’t anywhere near being pregnant.

“The only course of action we’re going to take,” Papi said, “is to stop yelling at Nelli and wait for the test results to come back. You’re only making this worse.”

“You’re not keeping it,” Mami said to me. I always knew that’s what she would say if something like that happened, which again, at this particular moment, was not what had happened. “You are not going to let Diego and this mistake ruin your career. You have a modeling shoot next week, and another audition lined up.”

“Stop!” Papi yelled at Mami. For a moment I thought he might smack her. I wouldn’t have blamed him.

“The doctor’s coming,” Trace told them. “I think it’s best if you both act like adults for a minute.”

I loved him. I really needed one of his big hugs right now.

“Nelli,” the doctor said. He looked at the three people in the room with me. “Nelli’s parents?”

“Yes,” Papi said. The doctor looked at Trace and Trace looked back at him as if he needed to stop wondering why he was there and just tell them what was wrong.

“The test results are back,” the doctor said, “and it looks like someone is anemic. Have you ever been diagnosed with that before?”

I shook my head and noticed Mami’s confused expression. Papi looked lost as well.

“She’s anemic?” Trace asked for them. “How is that possible?”

“It happens often in teenage girls,” the doctor explained. “Heavy menstruation and poor dietary habits can lead to an iron deficiency. I am a little concerned with your caloric intake. Have you not been eating a lot lately?”

Great. My mom thought I was pregnant and the doctor thought I was anorexic.

“I haven’t been in the mood to eat a lot lately,” I told him. “I try, but the idea of food has been making me nauseous. Plus, I’ve been working a lot on my projects in school, and my dance for the recital, and I had this audition that didn’t go well, and sometimes I honestly forget to eat.”

I was grateful when the doctor nodded with understanding. “It sounds like the problem here is stress. Some people deal with stress by not eating. It’s not at all uncommon. I think you should take a day off from school, relax, and eat some healthy balanced meals. If the problem persists then you should see your family physician about possible medication, but I think you won’t need it if you just relax a little.” The doctor then looked at my parents. “Do you have any questions?”

Mami was silent. Papi shook his head and said, “No. Thank you.”

“Alright, then let me sign off on these papers and you can take her home.” The doctor left.

I looked at Mami who was very unsure of what to say next. However, Papi knew exactly what to say.

“You stood here, and yelled at her, accusing her of something that wasn’t true, when the problem was you.”

“Do not put this on me,” Mami said.

“Don’t put this on you? She passed out and is in the hospital because of you. She’s stressed because how on Earth would she not be stressed when you expect her to be perfect every second of the day? And she hasn’t been eating? No doubt it’s because she’s starving herself for these ridiculous modeling assignments. I’m done with this. It stops today.”

Now I was stressed again.

“What are you trying to say?” Mami said. She looked nervous.

“No more. She’s not doing it anymore. I’ve let you get away with this for far too long. She’s done with the modeling, she’s done with the acting, she’s done with the dancing, she’s done with all of it. She’s done trying to live your dream.”

“You can’t do that. Nelli has worked so hard for this, and now she’s so close. I’ve worked so hard to get her this audition for this movie. She’s perfect for the part.” Now Mami was getting stressed. I couldn’t remember a time when Mami looked like she was going to cry. It was so weird to see her fall apart like this.

“That’s the problem,” Papi said to her. “She’s always perfect. It’s time for her to not be perfect anymore. If she keeps being perfect, she’s going to kill herself.”

“You’re not doing this to us,” Mami countered. “You’re not destroying everything we worked for.”

“The two of you need to take this outside,” Trace said. But I didn’t want them to go outside. I wanted them to stay here where I could keep an eye on them and make sure this fight didn’t turn into something they’d both regret.

“Can we just not fight?” I asked. “I’m really tired, and I just want to go home, and I don’t want you guys to fight.”

Trace grabbed my hand and squeezed it. “You just need to rest, baby girl,” he said. I held his hand as strongly as I could.

“We’re going to take you home,” Papi said as he pushed my hair behind my ear, “and then you’re going to get in bed, and relax, and we’ll get you some good food and some hot chocolate and whatever you want.”

Mami shook her head and threw her hand up in frustration. “I need to get some air. I’ll be outside.” She left the room and I bit my lip because this looked like it was going to be really bad.

“Papi,” I said grabbing his hand, “this isn’t her fault.”

“We don’t need to talk about this right now,” he said. “You just need to relax.”

“No, Papi, listen. This isn’t her fault. Please don’t fight about this. I’ll talk to Mami okay? Let me do it.”

Papi looked at me and then exchanged a glance with Trace who didn’t seem sure of how to respond to me either. Papi squeezed my hand and placed a kiss on my forehead. “Don’t worry about it, baby. Everything’s going to be okay.”

I wasn’t sure if that was true, but I took his reassurance for the moment.

When it was time to go, Papi helped me out of the bed because I still felt pretty weak. I focused on getting out of the hospital on my own two feet. Mami was already waiting in the car, and she didn’t say a word the whole way home.

Diego

For Nikki’s Chirp Day, Elvis and I had come up with a plan to take her to the mall and let her run loose in her favorite store so she could pick out whatever she wanted within monetary reason. Then we were going to take her to her favorite restaurant before heading back to her house and giving her the pleasure of having us suffer through her favorite chick flicks.

The plan was going well so far, and Nikki was trying on a million outfits while Elvis and I stood by the dressing room to give our opinions. It was amazing the things we did for Nikki.

“You look like you have a lot on your mind,” Elvis said to me as we waited for Nikki’s next outfit. We sat on round purple ottomans that were strategically placed by the dressing room.

“Just school stuff,” I said. I looked at my cell phone. I had sent Nelli a text message a while ago, but she hadn’t responded yet which was a bit weird.

“What’s going on with school?”

“I’ve been recommended for AP art classes next year,” I told him. Elvis looked impressed. I don’t think Elvis had ever looked impressed by anything I had ever said to him.

“That’s great. Congratulations. It makes sense. I didn’t understand why you didn’t start taking them this year.”

“I just don’t know if I want to take AP next year.”

“The artist in you does.”

“Yeah, but I don’t really need it. I have my private lessons with Mario, and he’s helping me a lot.”

“You know how many vocal coaches I’ve had over the years? Six. And I’ve learned something completely different and amazing from each of them.”

“But I just don’t see the point. AP is for college credit right? I’m not going to college. I’m just looking to pass all my easy classes next year so that I never have to deal with school again.”

Nikki came out to model a pants and shirt ensemble that looked really nice on her. Elvis and I gave her the thumbs up and she disappeared back into the room to try on the next thing.

“So then what?” Elvis asked. “You leave school and?”

“I don’t know. Create art. Nelli’s mom already has a lot of people interested in my work.” Elvis shook his head and twirled the hanger that he had picked up off the floor. “What?” I asked him.

“I just never figured you for that kind of guy.”

“What kind of guy?”

“The kind of guy you’ve become. Social engagements with Nelli, fancy art studio, new clothes every week, relying on her mom to sell your work. I always thought it was bad enough how much you relied on Nikki, but how long do you really think you’re going to last having to rely on Nelli and her mom?”

“It’s not like that,” I said, but unfortunately it was exactly like that. “I mean...” I didn’t know how to respond to Elvis.

“Do you even like it?” he asked me.

No. I didn’t like it at all. I hated the social engagements. I hated the dinners that she dragged me to. I hated when her mother came over unannounced and bragged about me and looked me over to make sure I was presentable.

“It has its moments,” I said.

“Like?”

Like how Nelli smiled, and how she always smelled so good, and how she danced around the studio while I created a painting of a lake, or a tree, or her. “Like when it’s just me and Nelli.”

“Is the other stuff really worth those moments with her?” I thought that was an awful question for him to ask. “I’m not trying to be mean or anything, but seriously, Diego. Is losing who you are worth it all? Because, yeah, Nelli is beautiful and she’s pretty fun, but so is Nikki, and with Nikki all you ever had to do was show up to school.”

Was he trying to get us back together?

“It’s a different situation,” I tried.

“How so?”

“It just is,” I said sharply.

I got up from the ottoman and walked over to the other side of the dressing room because I was tired of having this conversation with Elvis. It was a different situation because Nelli made me feel something that Nikki had never made me feel.

Useful.

Nikki never needed me. She was head of the class, she was a doer, she was confident, and she always had it together. She could survive anything, and all I ever did was give her a reason to be upset, or a reason to nag, or a reason to be disappointed.

Between Nikki and Nelli, Nelli was the one that was most real to me because she didn’t always have it together. No matter how hard she tried to trick everyone, I had seen her fall apart and I had been there for her. I knew that she needed me and appreciated me. To Nelli, I wasn’t a remedial, irresponsible boyfriend; I was an equal, someone to be proud of, someone worth bragging about and someone that she liked to have fun with.

Nikki came out again and twirled around in a blue dress that complimented her pale skin and blond hair. Elvis gave her the thumbs up and she looked at me waiting for my verdict. I had hesitated because she looked radiant, and because I realized at that moment how much I may have missed the feeling of knowing that someone was looking out for my best interest. Now I was really confused.

“Wow,” Nikki said as she looked down at the dress. “You hate it that much?”

I shook my head and allowed a small smile to form on my face.

“It’s perfect on you,” I told her.

Nikki made an excited noise and bounced back into the dressing room. Elvis looked at me with curiosity and I looked back down at my cell phone. I hated that he had been right about a few things, and I hated how he had made me think about this. I hated feeling confused, and I hated knowing that I had lost myself when I had told Nelli’s mom that I would play by her rules. I suddenly wondered where she kept all of the souls that she collected from people.

Nikki

At my birthday dinner, I had just stuffed myself silly when Diego answered his phone and got a weird look on his face. I had made out like a bandit at the store. I couldn't believe Elvis and Diego had combined forces to spruce up my wardrobe. It was seriously their best idea ever. Diego looked distressed as he talked on the phone and I sat up straighter and paid attention. When he hung up, Elvis and I gave him questioning glances.

"Nelli passed out at school today," he said. All I could think was that of course she did. Of course she would pass out on *my* birthday.

"Is she okay?" I asked.

"She's in bed resting. I guess she was taken to the hospital and everything."

I could see he was worried, and I could tell he wanted to be with her.

"Why did she pass out?" Elvis asked.

"Apparently she's anemic. She's been so stressed that she hasn't been eating right."

Oh please. If it had been something serious I would've given her some leeway, but passing out because she hadn't eaten? I wasn't going to let her have that one. So instead of insisting that Diego should go and be with her, I came up with a better plan.

"Poor Nelli," I said. "You know what we should do? We should go see her. We can bring Monopoly to her and everything. We'll just make her part of my birthday celebration." Elvis gave me a look and even Diego looked unsure, but I sighed and put my napkin on the table. "Look, Nelli and I are trying to work on being cool with each other. The least I can do is visit her when she's sick. I mean it's up to you guys, but which would you rather do? Play Monopoly with Nelli or watch *Dirty Dancing*?"

"I'll call her and let her know we're coming over," Diego said as he called her back.

Elvis continued to look at me and I just shrugged and waved the waiter over to let him know that I needed my piece of cake to go.

Diego

When we arrived at Nelli's home, her dad answered the door. Before I could finish saying, "Hello," he had grabbed my shirt and pulled me to the side. He didn't let go as he looked at Nikki.

"You must be Nikki," he said. "Happy Birthday."

"Thanks," Nikki said. She looked unsure as to why he was holding me and my shirt hostage.

"And you are?" He asked Elvis.

"I'm Elvis."

"Okay, if you say so," Nelli's dad said. He told them they could go up and see Nelli and then he looked at me. "We're going to have a little talk."

My eyes went wide and Nikki looked scared for me as Nelli's dad put his arm around me in order to better push me in whatever direction he wanted. It could very well have been the backyard, behind the shed, where it was dark and there would be no witnesses. It turned out that I ended up in his office instead. He slammed the door behind us then went to go stand behind his desk.

"Are you having sex with my daughter?"

My mouth went completely dry. How close was I to the door?

"Are you deaf?" he asked me.

"No, sir," I said quickly.

"Then answer my question."

Was it possible to lie about this? Was it possible to run? Then I remembered the beer on the yacht and how taking it seemed like the right answer, and the charity show where Nelli assured me that they'd like me if I was just myself.

"Yes," I said.

I saw his fingers tighten around the back of his chair. He started tapping his foot. He asked, "Are you using protection?"

"Yes, sir."

"All the time?"

"Yes, sir."

"You've never forgotten?"

"No, sir."

"You're not lying to me are you?"

"No, sir."

His foot continued to tap, and I wondered what inside of me kept me rooted to my spot instead of running for my life. I was going to have to talk with myself about this.

“I don’t approve of this,” he said, “but I’m not delusional enough to think I can stop it from happening. And while I would love nothing more than to hire a big security guard to be with my daughter at all times to make sure that you keep your hands off of her, I also know that it is impractical and would probably cost me my relationship with her. I trust Nelli. I don’t trust you. Do you understand me?”

“Yes, sir.”

“If I find out you ever did anything to hurt her, or if she ever turns out pregnant, or with an STD, or emotionally wrecked because of any of this; I will find you, and I will rip open your stomach, take out your intestines, and shove them down your throat until you choke. You understand me?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Good,” he relaxed his grip on his chair. “Did you know my daughter wasn’t eating?”

Was this going to cost me my intestines too?

“I had been noticing that she wasn’t eating as much as she used to, but I figured she was stressed. I thought for sure she was eating when she would go home.”

“Since she spends more time with you than she does with us, do you think you could find the common sense to alert us to possible problems like this?”

“Yes, sir.”

“That’s not too much to ask is it?”

“No, sir.”

“Is there anything else like this I should probably know about?”

“Not that I can think of.”

“Well you’ll let me know if there is won’t you?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Okay. You can go now.”

“Thank you, sir.”

I left that office so quick that I think I broke the sound barrier. Had I just thanked him for saying I could go? I went up the stairs and then stopped to catch my breath. I looked behind me scared that I was suddenly in a horror movie and that he would be standing at the bottom of the stairs with a knife, ready to cut open my stomach. Once my breath was back to normal and I

wasn't shaking from my near encounter with death, I went to Nelli's room where all eyes were on me.

"What happened?" Nelli asked with a concerned look.

"Your dad wanted to talk," I said as I sat at her desk and as far away from her bed as possible.

Then Nikki started laughing. "Oh my God," she said. "Did you just get the talk?"

"Oooh," Elvis said catching on, "the talk." He used finger quotes and everything.

"Shut up," I said. I felt my cheeks warm up. I really didn't want to talk about this.

"My dad gave you the talk?" Nelli asked. She was trying so hard not to laugh also. "What did he say to you?"

"Whatever it was, it scared him so much he won't even sit on your bed," Elvis pointed out.

"Come here," Nelli said while patting the side of her bed.

"No, I'm good over here," I let her know. Nikki and Elvis almost fell off the bed in laughter.

"Oh no," Nelli shook her head, "I can't have this. I don't care what he said. I will do so much worse to you if you don't sit here right now."

How was that fair? If he was going to take out my intestines, what was she going to take out? My beating heart? This family was crazy. I got up from the chair and sat on the bed behind Elvis.

"I said here," Nelli whined.

"I'm getting there. Give me a moment," I said. They all fell into laughter again at my expense. That was okay though because later on in the night when we were all playing Monopoly and encouraging Nelli to finish her tuna salad and fruit, the door opened unexpectedly and Nelli's dad came in to see what we were doing.

"Papi!" Nelli said. "Did you have to open the door so dramatically?"

"Just making sure," he said. Then he looked at me, and then he looked at Elvis, then back at me. I had tried to scoot a bit away from Nelli even though I hadn't been sitting next to her to begin with. Then he looked at Nelli and nodded, "This explains the Monopoly. I'll have to tell Trace he was right. I'm going to bed, have a good night, baby."

"Good night, Papi," Nelli said sweetly.

VIZCAYA

He gave me one last look before closing the door. I breathed a sigh of relief and Nikki silently laughed, trying hard to keep it contained. Elvis snickered and Nelli ate her tuna salad with a conniving grin. I rolled the dice.

32: REKINDLED FRIENDSHIP

Nelli

It was actually nice to have the day off from school. I woke up much later than I usually did, but I blamed that on fatigue. For the first time in a long time, I felt well rested. I smiled as I stretched my arms out above my head. I almost felt as if I could open the window and hear birds chirping and have one fly in and rest upon my arm as I hummed a tune. I laughed at the thought and got up to go get some breakfast, but as it turned out, it was already twelve in the afternoon.

I went to the kitchen where Felipa was working on lunch. She greeted me and told me to sit down while she finished preparing it. I went to get my cell phone to see if Diego had called me and found a missed call from Lindsey. She was probably checking up on me, but she was the last person I wanted to talk to right now. Who knew what she had told the school about what had happened.

With my phone in hand, I went back downstairs and sat at the table. I texted Diego to let him know I felt great today and that we should hang out. Mami came into the nook and I noticed that she wasn't dressed. She didn't look ready to go anywhere, and she looked like she hadn't gotten any sleep.

"How are you feeling?" she asked me. She gave me a kiss on the head.

"Much better. I think I just needed a day of sleeping in. I feel like I can do anything now."

"Hmm," Mami said. She poured herself a cup of coffee.

Felipa put a plate with grapes, slices of apples, cubes of cheese, and crackers in the middle of the table for us. I thanked her and ate a grape.

“Are you going to have lunch with me?” I asked Mami.

“Mhmm,” she replied. I wondered what was going through her mind. I could think of a few things. I wondered if Papi had talked to her after all and I wondered what he had said to her. I wouldn’t freak out just yet. She sat down with her coffee.

“I’m really sorry about yesterday,” I said to her. I felt I needed to apologize because she didn’t seem to want to say anything.

She shook her head. “It wasn’t your fault.”

“Well it was. I should’ve made sure to eat.”

“It’s not your fault,” she said again. “I’m sorry that I accused you the way I did. I was upset and angry, but mostly I was scared. I took it out on you and I shouldn’t have.”

Mami had never apologized to me for anything in my life. I looked at her waiting to see what else she would say. I could smell the Cuban sandwiches that Felipa was making start to heat up, and my mouth salivated. I hadn’t had one in so long. I wondered if Mami had her make them just to make sure I got protein and whatever else she thought I may have needed. I ate a piece of cheese.

“I wanted you to have it all,” Mami explained. “Every chance, every opportunity. I’m sorry, baby, but the world is so much easier when you’re good looking. People want to like you. People want to know you. Opportunities open up to you that would never open up to other people. People put you in commercials because they like how you look. They put you in their music videos because you’re beautiful. So many girls would kill to have your opportunities. I just wanted you to take advantage of what you had. You could do so much. You’re not just a pretty face. You’re smart like your father, and you’re manipulative, don’t think I don’t know that. I know what you do and I know how you do it. And I’ve always supported it because that’s what you need to make it in the real world.”

“I understand that,” I told her. I really did understand. My cell phone went off again. I sighed and hung up on Lindsey then turned my cell phone off. “I agree with you. I want to do whatever it takes.”

“Do you? Do you really? Because now is the time to tell me that you don’t want this anymore.”

“I do want it. Well, I want most of it. I don’t want to do the modeling. It’s boring and I never feel like it was really me. But, I love dancing more than anything, and I like acting, and I don’t mind trying to make it.”

She seemed very relieved to hear this and said, “The modeling was temporary anyway. It was just a way to get you out there. This movie that you’re auditioning for is what we’ve been working towards. Papi doesn’t understand. He’s never understood, but baby, you’re going to be a star.”

I smiled because who wouldn’t want to be a star? How weird that my conversation with Nikki at the mall seemed to be coming to mind right now. Then Mami looked thoughtful and said, “Papi doesn’t want you to go on this audition next week, and he doesn’t want you to continue your dance classes.”

“I’ll talk to him,” I said. “I told him I would anyway. I’ll tell him that I want to and that I’m going to drop modeling. He’ll be okay with it. I promise.”

Mami reached across the table and squeezed my hand with encouragement and hopefulness.

Nikki

When I got home from school, mom had some big surprises waiting for me.

“Ta da!” she said as she held up a UM T-shirt. I cooed and took the shirt hugging it close. Then I hugged her. Then I came to my senses.

“But I haven’t even applied.”

“I know, but I know you’re getting in so I thought I’d start stocking up on stuff. You should see your room.”

My room? Oh no. I ran to my room and found a whole stack of orange and green items on my white and peach floral bed set. It clashed horribly, but at that moment it was the most beautiful combination I had ever seen.

“Mom!” I said as I laughed. “You’re crazy.” There were more T-shirts, and notebooks, and pens, and banners, and baseball caps, and coffee mugs, and teddy bears with UM shirts on them. “What if I don’t get in?”

“You will. But if they’re crazy and don’t accept you, we’ll donate it to a youth shelter.”

I hugged my mom so tight because she was being so encouraging, but then I pulled away and looked at her again.

“Mom, even if I get in, we can’t afford UM.”

“We’ll figure it out,” she said. “If they don’t give you enough grants and scholarships to cover it, then you’ll take out loans, and I’ll take out loans, and your dad will take out loans, and I’ll take what’s in savings, and it will happen. So don’t worry about it. Just worry about the SAT and getting in.”

I hugged her again, and this time I didn’t let go of her for a very long time. I had been freaking out all day when I told Elvis the minimum score I needed on my SAT to compete with the average score of last year’s incoming freshman class. That meant I had to get above that to be a really strong candidate, and especially if I wanted to get into their difficult and strenuous architecture program. Elvis assured me this wasn’t a problem, but that was easy for him to say. He wasn’t even taking the SAT.

I let go of my mom and watched her grab one of the shirts.

“I think I’ll keep this one for when I go to the football games,” she said.

“Green and orange are definitely your colors,” I told her.

We laughed because they weren’t really, but from now on they would be.

Diego

Mario had a surprise for me today. A friend of his was in the studio, and when I sat down behind my canvas, he had her take off her clothes and lay on the table normally occupied by a still life. My eyes went wide and Mario smirked at me.

“You’ve never worked on form before have you?” he asked. “I figured. Don’t act like you’ve never seen a naked woman before.”

I bit the inside of my mouth as I smiled and tried not to nervously laugh. I had seen Nikki naked, and Nelli naked, but this woman was older and not as fit and not as pretty.

“So what am I drawing exactly?” I asked him.

“What you see. Quick drawings of what you see. Just start.” He sat beside me to see what I would do and I took the marker that he handed me and started trying to draw this woman. Mario was right beside me to watch and direct me better. “Where is her hand in relation to her leg? Don’t worry about the detail, get the gist of it. How is her arm bending?”

Just as I would start to get it, the woman would change position and I would have to start over. It was exhausting, but it was exciting, and I had never drawn like this before. When we were done I had about seven sheets

of large paper with rough sketches of a human body in several positions. I felt like I had created life.

“These are great,” Mario said as he looked at each one. The woman put her clothes back on and grabbed her bottle of water before coming over to look as well. “It’s definitely outstanding for your first time drawing form. Next time we’ll see how you are at contours.” The woman told me I did a great job as well and then she kissed Mario good-bye and left.

“Is that your girlfriend?” I asked him.

“Nah, just a friend,” he said. “So how’d you feel about your first nude?”

“It was cool. I liked trying to draw her. It was harder than I thought.”

“I knew you’d like it. You’re a fan of the living. I see it in all your work. School’s almost over right?” He put his hands behind his head as he talked to me.

“Yeah. I’m really looking forward to the summer. Hopefully it means that I can spend more time here and you can show me a lot more things.”

Mario nodded. “Yeah. And maybe I would know more about what I need to show you if you told me what decisions you have made about school. I see you’ve stuck it out so far.”

“Yeah. I didn’t want to, but I did it for Nikki. My friend. She’s like really smart, and she’s going to college, and I think she just wants me to graduate you know? I want to do that for her.”

“I think that’s a good call. And after that?”

“I don’t know. Try and do what you do?”

Mario laughed and dropped his arms back down. “No one can do what I do. No one can do what you do. But you have to always hone your skills. If you keep drawing but never push yourself to try something new, then you’ll never achieve the greatest art you possibly can. Which is why I think you should consider going to an art college.”

The word “college” made me laugh. I didn’t care what type of college it was, I knew that it wasn’t for me.

“You can laugh all you want. I know it’s SAT time. I’m willing to bet you weren’t planning on taking it.”

“I definitely wasn’t going to take it.”

“Good. You don’t need to. That’s the beauty of going to art school. It’s not about your SAT, it’s not about your GPA, it’s not about the classes you took, it’s about this,” he said as he pointed at the drawings. “It’s about this.” He pointed to my heart. “It’s what you want to do. And you’ll be doing it at a place that understands you, and a place where everyone else there is just like

you, and you'll feed off each other, and learn what it's like to be part of a real art community."

A college where I didn't have to take the SAT to get in, and didn't have to have a good GPA and it didn't matter that I never took physics or calculus, or whatever crazy classes that Nikki was taking senior year? It sounded like the island and Vizcaya all rolled into one.

"It sounds like paradise," I said.

"It is. If you want it to be. I'm not saying you won't have to work hard, and I'm not saying that it'll be easy to get in. The school I have in mind for you is competitive because they only accept people that they think have true talent. I can help you put together a portfolio of your work to submit. The rest is up to you. You interested?"

College.

It was the craziest idea I had ever heard outside of taking AP classes. Even Nikki had never suggested it to me.

"Yeah," I said. "I'm interested."

Nelli

Lindsey barged into my room. I was so annoyed to see her that I almost snapped at her right away, but there was something about her demeanor that made me stay quiet. She said, "Hey," and then took the chair from my desk and brought it over to my bed where I had been sitting and going over the sides for the audition.

"How are you feeling?" she asked me.

"Fine. Why are you here?"

"I wanted to make sure you were okay, and I wanted to talk to you about John."

"I'm fine and I don't care about John."

"I know that's not true," Lindsey said. She spoke in a tone that was more forceful and more confident than she had ever used. "I know you're worried about him, and I'm worried about him too. He won't talk to me or anyone."

"What am I supposed to do about it?" I still didn't look at her.

"Try talking to him again? The cafeteria was uncomfortable for him. Maybe you could go to his house and try. I don't know, but he needs someone."

"Why can't you do it?"

“I tried. He won’t see me.”

“Well he definitely won’t see me then. I’m done with John, and I thought I was done with you. So why don’t you just leave and stay out of my life please.”

Lindsey didn’t move. “So you kick me and John out of your life, but you keep Danielle and Ezra?”

“For now,” I said.

“Bad choice,” she said.

“Oh really?” I looked up at her. “And you and John were the better choice? John who was always trying to sleep with me? You, who the first chance you got, spread rumors about me not being a virgin? Right. I think I’ll stick to Danielle and Ezra.”

Lindsey let out a harsh laugh and then got up and sat on my bed. This made me pretty uncomfortable.

“Unbelievable,” she said. “Do you think that I really spread that rumor about you? Me? What have I ever done to make you think that I would do something like that? Maybe you should think long and hard about who has always tried to be better than you, and who has always suffered the most from you keeping her down. I never cared about stuff like that, Nelli. But you know who did. You know who started and spread that rumor.”

She was right. I think that I may have even sensed it from the moment that Danielle had pulled me into the bathroom and told me about the rumor. I sensed it when she waited to see my reaction, to see how I would feel about it, to see if her plan had worked.

“That bitch,” I said under my breath.

It made sense when I thought about how they had made fun of John. John was their friend, but they hadn’t done anything to try and stop him from going crazy on us. Lindsey had tried.

I got up from my bed. “Okay,” I said. “Let’s go see John.”

“You’re going. I’m going home.”

“I think we should go together. As friends.”

Lindsey looked a little sad by that, and she got up as well and looked me in the eyes. “We’re not friends, Nelli. I have new friends. Friends that actually like me and respect me and don’t steal the boys I like.”

I’m not sure why that hurt so much. Maybe it hurt because, deep down inside, I knew that Lindsey was a good friend. I nodded in understanding, and she left to go home. I left to go see John.

Nikki

Diego was totally pulling my leg. I was making brownies and he had shown up at my home out of nowhere. At first I had suspected that he had sensed the brownies, but no. It turned out that he had something huge to tell me, and now I was convinced it was just his brownie radar again.

“Right,” I said. “What college are you going to? Harvard? Yale?”

“I don’t know,” he said as he sat up on the counter. “Mario hasn’t given me the information yet. He said he’s going to take me on a tour of it and let me see for myself. And the best part is I don’t have to take the SAT to get in.”

I blinked at him because I couldn’t believe this. Then I dropped the bowl on the counter and wrapped my arms around his waist, squeezing him so tight. My Diego was going to college!

“I’m like so proud of you,” I said.

“Well don’t be proud yet. It’s not easy to get into and I have to have a strong portfolio.”

“Who has a stronger portfolio than you?” I asked him. “And besides, I’m proud that you’ve made this decision. The rest is just the icing on the cake.” He was amazing. He had exceeded all of my expectations, and he had done it because it was something he believed in himself about. I looked up at him, still smiling like crazy, still with my arms around his waist and my body between his legs. He looked down at me with a smile and moved my hair behind my ear with his fingers, just like he used to do before.

“I’m sure there are people with stronger portfolios, but I’ll get a chance to really work on mine when I take AP art classes next year.”

My mouth opened wide and I jumped up and down in place, still holding onto him, and still standing between his legs.

“I’m so excited for you!”

“It’s because of you, Nikki. I have to thank you. You always believed in me.”

“I did,” I said. “I was always just waiting for you to believe in yourself. And you finally have and I’m so happy.” My eyes were watering, but it was because of joy. It was because great things were going to happen for the both of us, and the future was looking perfect.

“Don’t cry,” he said as he moved his thumb over my cheek.

“I’m trying not to. I’m just so happy. I mean, you thought about your future! This is like a moment.”

He laughed and then probably because he forgot about the present for once, he leaned down and gave me a quick kiss on the lips. I took it because I knew why he had done it. He pulled away realizing what he had done and then took his hands off me. I removed my arms from his waist and took a step back.

“Sorry,” he said. “That was out of line.”

“It’s okay,” I said. “It didn’t happen.” I picked up the bowl and changed the subject really fast for his sake. “Okay, so I’ll put these in the oven, and you can grab the milk. I’ll invite Elvis over and we can do a movie. My mom should be home soon too.”

I said as many things as I could to get his mind off the kiss, and to assure him that he could safely be around me for the rest of the night. The last thing I wanted was for him to leave. Not now. Not when I really, truly felt he was mine again, even if just for this moment.

Nelli

I had fond memories of John’s house. His mom was always so sweet and his dad was quiet and tended to stay in his office whenever John’s friends were over. His house always smelled like nutmeg and cinnamon. The TV was always usually on, and the house was always a little dark since his mom was sensitive to light.

John’s room was also exactly how I remembered it. It was painted in a dark blue color and had very little décor. His video game consoles were set up perfectly for hours of uninterrupted play. I found him there now, playing some game where he got to shoot and kill people to his heart’s content. Maybe we all needed a game like that once in a while. I sat next to him and watched until he finally pressed pause and looked at me.

“What do you want?” he asked.

“I want to talk to you.”

“Not interested,” he said. He started playing again. I wondered if he was imagining that each of those people he was shooting was me.

“You were right,” I said to him. I decided that I would just talk and hopefully he’d hear what I have to say. “I asked Lindsey to be my friend again, and she said no. She has new friends. Friends that are nice to her. I also found out that Danielle is the one who started the rumor about me not being a virgin, although I guess it wasn’t really a rumor. So you were right.

And now that I've lost everyone, maybe I understand what you feel like, and maybe I think this really sucks and that we need to do something about it."

"I thought it would make you happy to lose everyone."

I smiled because he had listened after all. "John, I don't know what I wanted or what I didn't want. I just hated that you guys always wanted something from me. You wanted sex, Danielle wanted to meet rappers, Ezra wanted the party hook ups, Lindsey wanted to be popular, Brody...well I don't ever know what he wants, but you have to try and understand that I always felt that you guys didn't want to be my friend just to be my friend."

"You were wrong." He pressed pause again and looked at me. "I did just want to be your friend, and then I wanted to be more than your friend, and then when you started ignoring my advances, I started getting desperate. And then you started seeing that guy, and I got mad because I had been waiting all this time. Out of nowhere you found some guy who goes to a public school, who probably isn't even good enough for you, and you sit here and tell me that I wanted more. Yet all I could wonder was what crack you were smoking to think that this guy didn't want even more from you. You can't tell me that he just wants you for you, Nelli. He's got nothing. He doesn't even have a car."

That was an interesting observation. The difference was that I had wanted Diego the first moment I saw him, and I was willing to get him, even if he wanted me for the wrong reasons. So on the one hand, John had a point.

"I'm sorry I didn't want you back like that," I spoke carefully. "I wasn't attracted to you the way you were attracted to me. I don't know why. You're a great guy. You're smart. You're good-looking. You're edgy. A lot of the girls in school want you so bad, but I just never did. All I wanted was for us to just remain friends without you making me uncomfortable every time you tried to kiss me or woo me."

"I was so sure I'd be your first."

I didn't know what to say to that, so I sighed and leaned my head against the small couch as I looked at him.

"You could be someone else's first. Someone who wants you back just as much."

"I don't think it matters anymore," he said.

I looked at him concerned. "What about you?" I asked him. "What are you doing? Why did you shave your head? Why are you avoiding your friends?"

"They're not my friends."

“Ha,” I pointed at him with a smirk, “now you see what I mean.”

John thought about this for a second. “Yeah, maybe I do. I wanted to get away from them and just be alone for a while. There’s something refreshing about being the guy that people fear because they think you’re going to blow up the school or something.”

“No,” I shook my head, “I disagree, because those who do care about you get worried. And besides, wouldn’t it be better to screw them over by just sitting by yourself, still looking as normal as possible, and decide you’d rather sit and read a book than deal with them? I think that’s more powerful because then they can’t just point at you and say you’ve gone crazy, all they can do is call you a jerk and move on.”

“You’ve forgotten that I am crazy.”

“You’re not crazy. Just because your parents sent you away once, doesn’t make you crazy. Everyone goes through things, and sure, I could never imagine carving things into my arms, but if that’s what you have to do to make it through the day, then that’s what you have to do. Please tell me you haven’t done that though.”

“I haven’t,” he said. He showed me his arms which still had the scars from before but no new wounds.

“Good. Because if I’m going to be friends with somebody again, I need them to keep their skin closed and intact at all times.”

“Nelli, I’m not so sure we can be friends.”

“It’s okay. But I don’t have any friends, so I wouldn’t mind if you sat with me at lunch tomorrow, or maybe I could sit with you.”

“Fine. I’m only agreeing to this because I think you’re crazier than I am.”

“I bet I am.” I reached out to take his hand and held it firmly in mine. “You have to promise me that you’ll let your hair grow back. I also expect my friends to look good at all times.”

“So long as they’re not better looking than you,” he pointed out.

“No, that was old Nelli. New Nelli likes her friends to look just as hot as her. I mean, hello, have you seen New Nelli’s boyfriend? Hot.”

John made a gag noise and pulled his hand away so he could pretend to stick his finger down his throat. I laughed and took the controller out of his hand.

“Whatever, gag all you want, it doesn’t change that it’s true. I want to shoot some people now, do you mind?”

“Go for it,” he said. I picked up his game from where he had left off and shot my way through a field of bodies.

I had no idea what I had accomplished with John, but I think John missed having me in his life. I honestly did miss having him in mine. Part of me wished that John and I could have a relationship like Nikki and Elvis, but I knew it would never happen. John and Elvis were so different that if they met each other they would probably think the other had come from a different planet.

I wasn't delusional enough to think that everything was going to be fine between me and John, but I knew that for the time being, this was a Band-Aid, and we would just have to see where it went next. Maybe Lindsey would even give us another try someday.

Diego

I was surprised to see my mom at home. She was in the den watching TV and drinking a glass of wine.

"Hey, mom," I said as I put my stuff down and sat beside her.

"Hey, you're home." She smiled at me and squeezed my arm. "Were you out with Nelli?"

"I was at Nikki's with Elvis eating brownies and doing a movie night."

"That's so great," she said. "I'm so glad you still hang out with those two. How are they doing?"

"Great. Why are you home?"

"I'm not allowed to be home? I said I was going to spend more time here."

"I know, but you usually let me know which days you're going to be here and this wasn't one of them. If I had known I would've come home sooner so we could do dinner or hang out."

"I'm sorry." She put down her wine glass. "I didn't even think about it. Chris is out of town for a few days on a business trip, so I'll be here until he gets back."

I figured that maybe this was the universe's way of telling me that everything happened for a reason, and the very fact that she was unexpectedly home on the day I found out about the possibilities of a college future meant that I needed to have this conversation with her right now.

"So, mom," I said, suddenly feeling nervous, "Mario, the artist who's like training me, um, he thinks I should go to an art college after I graduate high school."

“Really?” she said as her eyes widened. “An art college? So he thinks you’re good enough for something like that?”

“Yeah, pretty much.”

“That’s great, baby.” She rubbed my arm again. “Do you want to?”

“Yeah, I mean, I think I do. He’s going to take me to check it out and see if it’s something I’d really like to do, but it’s weird because I never really thought about going to college. I barely thought I would graduate.”

“I’m so proud of you. I think an art college is the perfect place for you.”

“Thanks, mom,” I said. I leaned into her to give her a hug and a kiss on the cheek. Then I left her alone to watch TV.

I went to my room to see if Nelli had sent me any text messages. Strangely, she hadn’t. I took that as another sign that today was probably one of the weirdest days of my life. I changed into my boxers and got into bed then started to dial Nikki’s number, but then I stopped myself.

I had crossed a line that I shouldn’t have, and no matter how hard we had tried to play it off the rest of the night, that line had still been crossed. I needed to play it cool. I needed a night where I could think about crazy things like college, and not think about crazy things like Nelli or Nikki. So I turned off the light and tried as best as I could, but all I could do was replay that kiss in my head, and then replay kissing Nelli in my head, and then back and forth between the two until they blurred into a single person in my mind.

Nelli

“Why aren’t you sleeping?” Papi asked me when I walked into his office.

“Why aren’t you sleeping?” I asked him back. I put my arms around him and gave him a really big kiss on the cheek.

He rubbed my back as he pointed to the papers in front of him. “Looking over Luc’s contracts. Can you believe they already want him for endorsement deals? His video blew him up way quicker than we were expecting. It’s been crazy.”

I looked at the papers and then let go of Papi and went to sit in the chair at his desk so I could face him.

“That’s great,” I said. “I bet Luc is really happy about all of this.”

“Luc needs to just be happy that he’s still alive after that stunt he pulled during the video. I know that kiss wasn’t in the script.”

“Yeah, it was a little surprising.”

“Did you just get back from Diego’s?”

“No, it’s been a weird day. I just got back from John’s.”

Papi looked at me unsure of what I had said. “John’s? He’s back in the picture?”

“Not like that. We just hung out like we used to. We played video games. It was fun.”

“Video games, huh?” He looked back at the papers.

I smiled because sometimes Papi amused me.

“So, I wanted to talk to you about my career.”

He put his pen down, leaned back in his chair, and folded his hands. “Your career? The one where you stay in school, graduate, go to college, and do what you want to do?”

“I told Mami that I wasn’t going to do anymore modeling.”

“That’s good.”

“But, I want to keep dancing, and I want to go on this audition.”

“Because your mother wants you to.”

“No, because I want to. Papi, I love dancing. Dancing has always been my choice.”

“And the acting?”

“I like it. I have worked hard for this, and I do want to go on this audition.”

“You don’t have to live your mother’s dream.”

“I know.”

“Do you?” He looked so serious that I wanted to tell a joke to loosen him up. I didn’t like it when Papi was so serious.

“Maybe I want to make her proud because I do know how much work she puts into everything, and I know what it means to her. But, at the same time, this is a great opportunity for me too, and there’s no reason why I shouldn’t do it. Have you ever thought that maybe Mami sometimes feels like this is her way of contributing to the family? You’re always working, and you’ve achieved so much, and you achieved all of your dreams, but she didn’t. She had me and it stopped. She stopped modeling and acting to be your wife and to raise me. Have you ever thought that maybe all Mami wants is to be able to achieve all her dreams too?”

“And what about your dreams?” Papi asked me. “Don’t you want to achieve all of yours?”

“I can. I can help Mami achieve hers, and then when I’m done wanting to act or dance, I can always go to school and learn to do something else. This doesn’t have to be forever.”

“You know that’s not true. Your mother does want this to be forever. She’s living vicariously through you. She’s not doing any of this for you. She’s doing it all for herself. She’s always been superficial and selfish. She’s lying to you. Do you know what happens if you get this movie? Do you even know where this movie is filming? It’s filming in California. What your mom wants is for you to get this movie, so the two of you can move out there, and so she can network and find ways to get back into the spotlight. That’s what this is all about.”

I bit my lip and looked at him. “That’s not true. Why are you being so mean to her? There’s a reason you fell in love with her. Have you forgotten that? Why do you hate her so much all of a sudden?”

“I don’t hate her, but the woman I fell in love with never would have done this to our daughter. She’s got you brainwashed.”

I stood up. I was so angry, and I didn’t want to hear any more of this. “I’m doing this audition, and I’m sorry you don’t like it. Mami has supported you all these years, and I think the least you can do is support her and my decision.”

“Nelli,” Papi called after me, but I ran out of his office and up to my room.

I didn’t understand what was going on, and I didn’t understand why he was doing this to us, and mostly, I didn’t understand why in the pit of my stomach, I knew he was right.

33: PORTFOLIOS

Diego

I was looking forward to a long, fun summer with Nelli and Nikki, and Elvis too. I thought it would be fun to hit up the beach a lot and do lunch at the bagel shop where Nikki had picked up her summer job again. I had a lot of dreams about what we would do, and how we would do it, but it wasn't meant to be. Nelli had nailed her audition, and tomorrow she would leave to California for two months.

"What kind of movie is it?" Elvis asked as we walked through the trail that wended through the jungle of trees and plants that led the way to the entrance of Vizcaya.

"It's a teen movie," Nelli explained. "There are these three girls fighting over a guy, and the guy has to choose one of them to take to the prom so they all do these stabbing in the back kind of things that end up being comedic. I play the sweet one."

Nikki snorted and then she apologized. "I can see you pulling off the sweet one."

Nelli smirked at Nikki. "I'm a good actress."

"That you are," Nikki acknowledged.

The girls laughed as we paid our admission. The point of this trip was three-fold. First, I was going to help Nikki with her portfolio that she needed for admission into the architecture program at UM. Second, I wanted to get some new art done as well for possible insertion into my portfolio. Third, we couldn't think of a better place to celebrate our last day with Nelli.

We went inside the museum and walked around each room while Nikki tried to find something she wanted to focus on. She finally decided that it was the spiral staircase that held her imagination. It was a small stairwell. There wasn't a lot of space to work with, so I had to sit one step up from her on the stairs while I helped her figure out the perspective for her drawing.

Nelli and Elvis entertained themselves by doing an undercover photo shoot as Elvis tried to surreptitiously take photos of her without the museum staff catching them. Elvis complained that of course we had picked to draw the inside of the house where photography was strictly prohibited. We had to move a few times to let visitors pass through, and then Elvis and Nelli decided to be dramatic and climb up the stairs just to run down them as if making a horror movie. Luckily, Nikki finished her rendition of the staircase before we could be kicked out.

We went outside and headed to the secret garden, where Nikki decided to draw the stone archway to the left and the thin black staircase that ran up alongside the yellow wall. There were so many details to capture: the bright green of the grass in the courtyard, the planters aligned in a column with their bright, red flowers shouting out against the yellow painted backdrop, the rough stone alternating with the smooth stone up the sides of the archway, the trimmed evergreen hedges, the almost comical face carved into the stone above the archway, the stone steps that were in our line of sight.

Nikki did her best to capture each and every one of these things, and I did my best to render it in my own way. But then I got caught up in how intensely Nikki stared at something before trying to draw it, and before I knew it, I was drawing her drawing the secret garden around us.

Nelli

Elvis thought it would be cute for Diego and I to do a photo shoot so that I could have pictures in California to remind me of both him and Vizcaya. We posed everywhere we possibly could: in the gazebo where we held hands and pretended to dance, near the water where he held onto me tightly and spoiled me with kisses before pretending to throw me into the bay, by the orchid garden where I did some lyrical moves to make it "artsy" only to have Diego do a silly dance move to ruin the effect.

We did romantic pictures in the garden: me against a wall, him with his arm behind me, leaning in as if he was going to kiss me, pictures of us sitting

by the fountain holding hands, pictures of me on his lap, and in turn, him on mine. We even lay on the grass, which may not have been the best idea, but Elvis liked the pose and we humored him before getting up and assuring each other there were no grass stains on our clothes.

We did all this while Nikki sat on the stairs and tried to draw the side of the villa. Elvis decided that he wanted to photograph her doing this, so Diego and I hid in one of the grottos and he kissed me in a way that felt so tender, yet hungry at once. I wrapped my fingers in his hair and pulled him closer, giggling a little as I felt we would be found out at any moment by Elvis. I hoped it took him a long time to figure out where we had disappeared to.

“I wish you could come with me,” I told him. I mentioned the idea to Mami but she had said that I didn’t need the distraction.

“I wish I could, too,” he said. He laced his fingers through mine and looked me in the eyes. How intensely blue they still managed to look even in the shade of the grotto. “I know two months isn’t really that long, but it’s going to feel like forever.”

“Yeah it is,” I agreed. “I’m going to call you like every day.”

“I’ll keep my phone on me at all times then.”

“You’re not going to get jealous again when I kiss this guy in the movie are you?”

“No.” He cupped my face and gave me another kiss. “I’ve learned my lesson.”

“Good,” I said as I moved my lips to his chin and dropped kisses on every available spot. “Try not to find new inspiration while I’m gone.”

“I think that would be impossible,” he said.

I gave him a long and memorable kiss for that.

Nikki

I sucked at drawing. Okay maybe sucked wasn’t the right word. Nothing looked right. The lines seemed to be straight enough, they connected in the right places, I was even pretty sure I got the angles at the right degrees, but what I was looking at didn’t look a lot like what was on my paper. I pouted.

“What’s the problem?” Elvis asked as he crouched beside me.

“I suck at this.”

Elvis looked at my drawing, then at the house, then at me.

“You’re on crack. It looks great.”

Well maybe it didn’t “suck” suck.

“But it looks so amateur. You know how when Diego draws something it’s like art? Like he really captures what it looks like? This doesn’t do that.”

“You’re not trying to create art,” Elvis reminded me. “Besides, why would you torture yourself by comparing your drawing to Diego’s? That’s like comparing yourself to DaVinci or something.”

I knew it was stupid to compare my drawing to Diego’s, but I had been hoping that the inspiration would just magically make my drawings look amazing. I had to compete against a lot of people to get into this selective program. What if they could draw like Diego and were better than me in school and did better than me on the SAT? I had to do this right.

“I bet you got a lot of great pictures of them,” I said as I erased the windows and tried to redo them more accurately.

“They’re great models,” he said. “Actually, I’m sort of working on my portfolio as well.”

“Really? What portfolio?”

“Well I thought about what you said,” he began. He chose a step to sit on that faced me. “And I realized that my mom probably wouldn’t have an issue with me pursuing photography on the side while we wait for my big break to come. So long as I keep singing and doing what she wants, she can’t really complain about the stuff that we can’t control. So I’ve been looking into creating a portfolio and seeing if I can get some photo jobs.”

“Oh wow,” I said as my face lit up for him, “I think that’s a great idea. A super great idea. Have you told your mom?”

“Not yet. I probably won’t tell her for a while. I don’t want to bring it up if it’s not going to go anywhere.”

“It’ll go somewhere. You’re so talented.”

“We’ll see. But hey, if Nelli blows up into some superstar overnight because of this movie, I’ll have the exclusive, never before seen, photos of her.”

I laughed because that was so true. “You could start leaking them one by one to the celebrity magazines.”

“And then she’ll sue me and I’ll counter sue and we’ll be stuck in a legal battle for years.”

“This sounds like the perfect Hollywood story.” I reached over to take his hand. “Do you think that you’ll be able to take a break from your busy photography schedule to photograph my buildings when I build them?”

“Well,” he said as he swung our hands back and forth, “buildings have never been my specialty, but for you I’ll try.”

Elvis was the best. I knew things would work out for him because he was Elvis, and he deserved to have things work out for him. Sure it seemed like nice guys finished last, but I was pretty sure that when it came to the one thing he loved most, he would come out on top.

Nelli

I didn’t want to leave. Elvis had had the brilliant idea of bringing Monopoly with us, and as we sat on the mound in the gardens of Vizcaya, we played and tried to not think about how we’d have to wait two months to do something like this again. I suddenly missed everything. Not just Diego, or Nikki, or Elvis, or even John and Lindsey, but I suddenly missed home. I missed my bedroom, and Felipa’s cooking, and the beach, and Miami, and school, and Ms. Rosa and the dance studio. Thinking about two months without these things was almost enough to make me call Mami and tell her to cancel the whole deal.

I took in the scene in front of me and thought about the way that these three people had come to mean so much to me in what seemed like a small period of time. Somehow, without knowing them as long as I had known Lindsey, or John, or Danielle, they had become the closest I had ever had to really good friends. But when I really thought about it, I realized that our friendship was the same as my other ones. Had I treated Elvis any differently than I treat Ezra? Didn’t I steal Nikki’s boyfriend just as I had stolen Lindsey’s crush? And Diego? How easily it could’ve been John that night instead of him. It almost was John until Diego came knocking on the door.

I had replaced my old friends with these friends, and I knew that I was no better to them than I was to the previous group. I vowed that I would change that. When I got back from L.A., I would apologize to Nikki, and I would treat Elvis with more respect, and I would assure Diego that he meant so much to me. This time, I would do it right. This time, I wouldn’t lose my friends.

34: A NEW VIZCAYA

Diego

Mario kidnapped me for a three hour drive northwest. He told me a little more about his life and his training as we drove through Alligator Alley. I learned that Mario had once attended the Accademia di Belle Arti di Brera in Milan, and had contributed to a political mural that had made national news. He told me about when he first discovered that he liked art, and then when he discovered that he was an artist.

“So how did you meet Nelli’s mom?” I asked him as the conversation ebbed and flowed into new topics.

“We go way back,” he explained. As we passed Naples, Bonita Springs, and Fort Myers, he told me about how he had known her mom back when she had been a model. The two hung around in the same scenes and became lifelong friends. “I was surprised she married him,” he said when talking about Nelli’s dad. “I knew why she did it though. The money, the status, the clout. It was everything she always wanted.”

“Nelli’s dad scares me,” I confessed. Mario laughed, but he never told me that I should feel any differently.

We arrived in Sarasota where Mario introduced me to a school called Ringling.

“Like the circus?” I asked him.

“It was founded by one of the Ringling Brothers,” he confirmed, “but trust me, it’s not a circus.”

A school founded by a circus guy sounded like a far cry from the Accademia di Brera, but I followed him onto what I realized was a campus that felt familiar to me. It was as if I was right around the corner from where I lived. There were palm trees lining the way to the entrance of the main building, and as we walked, everywhere around me there was art. There were sculptures and outdoor installations of abstract pieces that captured my imagination.

We walked inside the main building and my eyes tried to take in everything I saw. It was summer, so it wasn't as busy as normal, but it wasn't hard to imagine all the art students running from class to class, or stopping to talk and catch up with their friends. Mario showed me the offices, the cafeteria which had art on its walls, some of the classrooms, and then he took me into the first studio and I fell in love at sight.

It was the perfect work space with white walls, high ceilings, wooden work benches, and easels splattered with paint as if Jackson Pollack himself had come in to decorate. It smelled like oil paints. It smelled like home. Each studio he took me into was grander than the next. I wanted to just sit there and start working. At one point I sat in one of the chairs and just looked around wondering how this place could exist.

When we walked back outside, I was met by water. A bayou, flowing among the trees and shrubbery, made this a very peaceful place. It was from this water that the studios got their name, and once I had entered another one, I sat down again and looked at Mario.

"Does it make me sound stupid if I say I never knew places like this existed?"

"No," Mario said. He sat down as well. "Places exist for everything you can dream of. You just have to know where to look."

"I've never even heard of this place."

"If you had ever thought that going to college was an option for you, you would've stumbled upon it on your own. You would've done your research and this school most certainly would've been at the top of your list. I see you here. How about you?"

I nodded as I rubbed my hands on my jeans and looked around. "I definitely see me here." Then I wondered why he saw me here. "So there's other schools right? Why this one? Why do you see me at this one?"

"Because of your painting," he said as he stood back up. "The one of Vizcaya that you've been working on for months now. The one you can't

seem to finish because you want it to be an exact representation of the actual place.”

I didn't understand what Vizcaya had to do with this school, but he motioned that it was time to go. I followed him out of the studios and we headed back to his car.

“The school was founded by John Ringling,” he explained as he drove. “He lived right up the street in *Cà d'Zan* which is now a museum.” He parked the car in the parking lot of what was soon to become one of the greatest things I had ever seen in my whole entire life. My heart beat faster as we approached the entrance of the grand and luxurious building, and once we were inside, I carefully inspected each room, moving through the house reverently, and thinking of only one thing.

Nikki had to see this place.

I looked out the window and admired the view of the Sarasota Bay. “This place can't be real,” I said to Mario.

“It's about as real as Vizcaya is.”

“Yeah, I guess,” I said. Yes, both places were large, and beautiful, and had an impressive collection of art and furniture. But Vizcaya was home. “I like it, I like it a lot, and the more I come here, the more I'm sure I'll like it. But it'll never be Vizcaya.”

Mario said he understood, and he stood next to me to admire the view as well.

Nelli

Mami had rented a home for us to use while we were in Los Angeles, but my real home was my trailer where I sat and waited to be called back on set. I busied myself by reading over my lines and texting back and forth with Diego, who had apparently fallen in love with the art school he was going to do everything in his power to attend.

I was happy for him, and I suddenly thought about what that would possibly mean for us. We had a year to figure it out, but if he was away at college, would he still even want to be with me while I finished my senior year of high school? I definitely didn't want to think about this so I grabbed the remote and turned on the TV to find some program to keep my mind occupied.

I was on my second circuit of going through the channels when my phone rang. It was Papi. He had been very unhappy about my decision, but I had done my best to avoid him and the issue before leaving. It was only at the airport that I finally really looked at him, and he gave me a hug and told me to take care of myself. I knew I shouldn't be mad at him, but it was hard to forgive him for what he had said about Mami.

"Hey," I said.

"Hey," he said back to me. "How's it going?"

"It's going. I'm bored right now. They don't need me on set at the moment."

"Oh, well I'm sorry you're bored. Listen, I wanted to talk to you about something." I wasn't sure why my stomach felt like it was tightening itself into knots, but I listened anyway. "Mami wants to stay in Los Angeles. I don't know if she's talked to you about this yet, but she's looking for a permanent home for the two of you. We're...well I think it's obvious to you that we're getting separated."

I wanted to throw up. I bit my lip and kept listening.

"She wants you to stay with her, obviously, and she's looking for a school to enroll you in. You're about to turn seventeen, and as much as I want to tell you what to do, this is going to have to be your decision."

My tears pooled and I felt my face heat up. I wanted to hang up and run far away from everyone and everything.

"If I can put in my two cents," Papi continued, "I would really love for you to come back home. I think you should be here with your friends and your family. I love you, baby. Just remember that, no matter what you decide."

I couldn't say anything so I hung up. I wrapped my arms around my stomach to control it from making me throw up. My heart hurt so badly, and I tried very hard to keep the tears from falling because at any moment I could've been called to set. I swallowed profusely and tried to rid every single emotion that I was feeling right at that moment. I had to keep it together. I had to stay in control. I had to forget that this ever happened. I had to be professional. I had to be perfect.

Nikki

I had annoyed my boss the entire day. It wasn't intentional, but who had time to think about selling bagels when there were dining areas to draw? I thought it would look really awesome in my portfolio if I had a drawing of the interior of the bagel shop. I included everything from the square tables to the soda machine. It was really inspired.

"Why is one table bigger than the others?" Elvis asked as he leaned against the counter.

I whined and erased the bigger table. A customer came in and I put down my pencil and said to Elvis, "Move. Customer." Elvis knew the drill and stepped to the side as the customer placed his order. Once his bagel and latte were in his hands, I picked up my pencil and started on the table again as Elvis slid back into place.

"There has to be a trick for getting everything the right size," I said as I looked at the table and tried to find the magic connection between how it looked in relation to the one next to it.

"I'm so glad I don't have to draw anything ever again," Elvis said. I heard the door open and put my pencil down to get ready for the next customer, but it was Diego, so I picked my pencil up and smiled at him because he was smiling really big and it was infectious.

"Someone's happy," Elvis observed.

"I found my future," Diego said. I thought he was messing with me. His future. Psh, yeah right.

"What do you know about the future?" I teased him. He handed me the brochure for the school he had just come back from touring and I looked through it with excitement. "Wait? It's called Ringling? Like the circus?"

"That's what I said," Diego pointed out.

"Ringling?" Elvis asked. "That's a really good school."

"You knew about this school?" Diego asked.

"I stumbled upon it while I was doing research for photography programs. It's got a great reputation."

"I am so happy for you," I said wanting to jump over the counter and hug him. "This is so, so, so exciting."

"I'm excited too," he said. He pulled out another brochure, "Because it's next to this museum, and you're going to love visiting me just so I can take you there." He handed me the brochure and I took it and got even more excited.

VIZCAYA

“It’s like Vizcaya,” I said as I took in the architecture, the rooms, and the way it sat right on the water.

“It is, but Vizcaya is better,” he said. I agreed, even though I hadn’t been to the other one to really compare.

Sarasota.

That seemed so far away. I couldn’t imagine not seeing Diego every day or at least five times a week. I suddenly didn’t like this very much.

“You okay?” Elvis asked.

“Yeah.” I gave Diego his brochure back. “It’s just that, I guess this whole college thing seemed easier when I thought you weren’t going to college. You know, because you’d be in town and stuff. Not that I don’t want you to go. I want you to go. This school sounds perfect for you.”

“I know what you mean,” Diego said. “I thought about that too, but then I thought that it’s only like three hours away and we can visit each other on the weekends and stuff.”

“To be honest,” Elvis said, “you’re going to be so caught up with being a UM nerd that you probably won’t even miss him until the weekend.”

“That’s true,” Diego agreed, “you’ll be so stressed about math and science stuff that you won’t even think about me.”

They had a point, and wow I was such a nerd if that really was the case. “Oh my God,” I said, “I’m not going to have a social life.”

“You never had one before,” Elvis pointed out, “this won’t be any different.”

I glared at both of them, but then acknowledged they were right. I took the next customer that came in and then Diego helped me with my table drawing issues until the end of my shift.

35: BOOMERS!

Diego

I had found my favorite spot in the bagel shop to sit and draw. It was in the corner, near the window, where the sunlight streamed in best. From there I could face the entire restaurant and make quick impressions of anyone in the shop. I was finding it particularly pleasurable to depict the line of bodies that constantly changed as they placed their orders.

It was only when I needed a break that I would join Elvis at the table closer to Nikki. I usually didn't take that chance when it was too busy because then I would lose my table for good. Spending my time at the shop felt so relaxing that I wondered why I hadn't taken advantage of it last year. I should've been here. It never should've been Eric.

Nikki motioned for me to come up to the counter, and I put my things down and walked over to where she was holding out a cookie for me. I looked at her suspiciously.

"What do you want me to do?"

"I've been thinking long and hard about this," she said, "and I'll give you a cookie if you say yes."

"What's the question?" I asked as I tried to guess what it was.

In the past few weeks she had given me a cookie for everything, from running over to the burger place next door to get her a cheeseburger, to putting gas in her mom's car on the days she got to borrow it. I think she knew that I would've done it even without the cookie as incentive, but now the cookie had become a symbol of request.

“I want to go to Boomers! and I think you should take me.”

That was so out of left field. “Boomers?” I asked her to confirm. She nodded enthusiastically and I could only ask, “Why?”

“Because my mom used to take me when I was little and I haven’t been in forever. I just remember that there were go-karts, and my mom would never let me drive them. Now I’m older and I want to drive them.”

I laughed at this. Elvis came over to see what the cookie was about.

“Boomers!” I told him. “She wants to drive a go-kart.”

“I haven’t been there in forever,” Elvis said.

“See?” Nikki said. “We should all go. It’ll be fun. We can be kids again.”

I took the cookie from her hand and took a bite.

“You wanna go after your shift?” I asked her.

Nikki hopped up and down.

Elvis shook his head at her and said, “I can’t believe you’re this excited about a go-kart. Well I hope you two have fun.”

“What?” Nikki asked as she stopped hopping. “You’re coming too.”

“I can’t tonight. I promised my mom I’d go with her to visit my grandmother.”

“Well we can do it tomorrow then,” Nikki tried, and again Elvis shook his head.

“No, go ahead. I’m sure you’ll get inspired to go again, and your schedule is harder to work around than mine. Besides, I can’t handle you acting like this for an entire evening.”

“Hey!” Nikki said. I ate my cookie innocently even though I was cracking up on the inside. “Okay, so my shift ends in exactly one hour. The moment that hour strikes we’re on our way.” She turned around to start cleaning up and Elvis wished me luck in dealing with her for the rest of the day.

Nikki

I could not be more ecstatic. Boomers! was a lot smaller than I remembered, but it was still exactly how I pictured it. I got behind the wheel of my go-kart and took a second to breathe in this reverent moment.

“I should’ve brought Elvis’ camera with me to capture this,” Diego joked.

I told him to shush as I continued to take it all in. Then I was ready and I took off at the blazing speed of...well as fast as my little, green go-kart could

go. Diego tried to keep up, but I was a go-kart demon. When I hit the finish line I refused to get out of my vehicle.

“Seriously?” Diego asked as he gripped the side of the car and leaned in to look at me.

“I wanna go again,” I said, not letting go of the steering wheel.

“Crazy,” he taunted me.

He hopped into the passenger side which made me all kinds of happy. I took off before the attendant could protest, although what was to protest? I was a good driver and we were both tall enough to be in there. Well maybe too tall. It was a little cramped, but I didn’t mind being this close to Diego. I liked that his leg was glued to mine, and that his arm was draped around my shoulders, and that he kept making jokes like, “Watch out for the cow!” as we went around the bend.

When we finished the lap, Diego pried my hands from the steering wheel and pulled me out of the go-kart. It was only because he promised that we’d do it again after our round of laser tag. This got me excited all over again because I loved laser tag!

I raced him over to the laser tag area where we were put on a team with a family of four.

“You guys better be good,” the little girl said as she pretended to charge up her laser gun. She scared me.

“Don’t worry. We do this all the time,” Diego lied, but the little girl didn’t look convinced.

I made sure my chest plate was on correctly and then looked at Diego who already had his on and was ready to go. I tried to practice shooting my gun at him and the little girl glared at me.

“I was just practicing,” I said to her.

“Don’t practice on your own teammate,” she said. “What if it accidentally counts against us?”

“She’s a blonde,” Diego said to the little girl, and I hit his arm. Hard. He laughed as he rubbed it and then the game began.

I ran behind one of the walls and then looked around to try and find any moving targets. I spotted someone and shot at them then realized they were on my team.

“Sorry!” I said to the little girl’s dad.

“Ha!” someone said from behind me and now I was the one being shot at. I ran across the room screaming and was suddenly reminded of all the times Diego and I used to play hide and seek. What had he been thinking? Laser

tag was the worst game possible for me. I screamed just when I switched positions! Realizing that I was probably going to lose this game for us, I tried to hunker down in a corner, but that didn't work either and soon I was running again.

Diego ran by me, shooting behind him at someone who was shooting at him.

"Run, Nik!" Diego said.

I realized that I had forgotten to move out of the way, so naturally the guy who was shooting at him, ended up shooting me. So I screamed and ran, and then realized that I should've tried to shoot him back. I tried to hide again, but I had been found, and just as I was about to get shot, Diego pulled me out of harm's way and shot the guy instead. He looked like one of those action heroes in an action film. It was amazing.

The game ended, and I felt compelled to give him the kiss that the heroine always gives the hero at the end of those movies, but that idea dissipated when the little girl came up to me with her hands on her hips.

"You suck!" she said.

Diego tried not to laugh and he took the laser gun out of my hand. "Go-Karts?" he asked.

"Go-Karts!" I said and I hopped in excitement.

Nelli

I was on set waiting for my next scene, and while I waited, I joked with the director and playfully wrapped my arms around him as he laughed at what I had said. Mami had said that she noticed how much more he left the scenes on me whenever I gave him this kind of attention, so I doted on him. When it was time to film my scene, I went on set where one of my co-stars threw me a tiny glare that was visible only to me.

I didn't care.

It's not like I was doing anything that she couldn't be doing. We did the scene in two takes. The first time she had fumbled a line which had only made me smirk. The rest of the scenes were done with fewer problems. When it was finally time for lunch, I walked to my trailer where Mami was waiting for me.

"Hi, baby," she said waving at me as I walked in. She was on her cell phone and writing something down on a piece of paper. "Okay, great. I'll

stop by in a couple of hours.” She hung up and smiled at me. “That was the realtor. He thinks he’s found a perfect place. It’s a bit small. It only has five rooms, but it has a great view of the Pacific.”

“That sounds great,” I said. I sat on the couch thinking that it didn’t sound great at all. I hadn’t made a decision yet, but Mami was convinced that once she found the perfect house there would be no room for argument.

“Doesn’t it?” she asked as she took out her planner. “You know what’s even greater? I think I found you the perfect agent. I’m going to set up dinner plans with him.”

I said, “That sounds great,” again and looked at my cell phone to see if there were any messages from Diego. Normally I would find three or four by the time I got off-set, but lately it had been dropping down to two. Today there was only one which had come early in the morning. I hated that he got to spend this time alone with Nikki, and I wondered what exactly they had been doing while I was gone. I could only imagine that Nikki was using this summer to her advantage as retaliation for last summer.

“Isn’t this your lunch break?” Mami asked me. “Why aren’t you eating? The last thing we need is you passing out on the set.”

I got up from the couch and went to the small fridge where there was some low-fat yogurt. I decided that would make a good enough lunch for now. I sat back down and began eating while I looked again at the text message from Diego. I texted him back to let him know that I was on lunch and that he could call me.

“You know, it wouldn’t hurt to make some friends while you’re on set,” Mami continued speaking even though she was writing into her planner. “You need to get out there and meet people. It’s all about meeting people. You should find out which parties they’re going to, or what clubs, and you should go with them.”

“Sure,” I said. Why wasn’t he calling me? Normally he’d call me after I sent him a text that said I was available. He knew when my lunch breaks tended to be.

“I just want you to get the most out of your experience.”

“I know, Mami.”

She closed her planner and collected her things. “Okay, well I’m off.” She gave me a kiss on the cheek before leaving me alone in my trailer.

I tossed the half of the yogurt that I hadn’t eaten and curled up on the couch waiting for the phone to ring.

It never did.

Diego

Nikki was jumping more now than she had been before, and all because she had gotten a strike in her final frame. She was actually a pretty good bowler considering that I don't think she had been bowling that much in her life. I was doing pretty well considering the same circumstances.

"I think I'm going to beat you," she said.

"I'm pretty sure you will," I told her. I grabbed my ball and lined up my shot. I let the ball loose and managed to only knock down half of them.

"Yes!" she said. I pretended to be mad at her. "Hey, no one ever said I had good sportsmanship," she said in her defense.

I grabbed my ball again and only managed to get two which meant the game was over. Her hands were up in the air as she cheered herself for herself. I sat down to change my shoes as I let her have her moment of victory.

Once everything had been turned back in, we went back out to where the rides were and got on the carousel for the fifth time that night. It was amazing how doing the same thing over and over didn't take away from her enjoyment of it. I started to think that she could live here and never get tired of doing any of it.

I let her pick the horse she wanted to mount and I took the one beside it, pretending to crack a whip to make it giddy-up.

"Hey there, cowboy," she said as she laughed, and I laughed as well.

I felt like I was all of ten. The carousel began and as it went around and around, my eyes stayed on her as she closed her eyes and enjoyed the ride. It was odd how sensual it suddenly looked, and she tossed her head back causing her hair to flow behind her. I kept my eyes on her the entire time and when the carousel began to slow, she opened her eyes and looked at me.

"The ride is always so short."

"I'm sure they'll let us stay on," I said, and sure enough they did. We went around again, and this time I got off my horse as it went down and grabbed onto her horse, putting my foot in the stirrup and going up with it.

"Hey," she said while laughing, "you're gonna get in trouble."

"They won't catch me," I said. I got on her horse and slid right behind her then pulled her close against me. "They let people double ride all the time anyway."

"Yeah if it's a little kid," she pointed out, but she held onto my hands as if to keep me there. I didn't know what I was doing. All I knew was that I

wanted to be holding her like this. I wanted to smell her hair and feel how warm she was. Again, the ride was over too soon, but neither of us moved and we went around again.

“Diego?” she said.

“Yeah?”

“I wish this summer would never end.”

“Yeah,” I said.

When the ride finished again, I got up and got off the horse first. I took her hand to help her dismount. We stood in between two horses, facing each other, as people got on and off the carousel again. I moved my hand up to Nikki’s face and could see her green eyes looking at me with expectation. I leaned in to kiss her, but a kid came barreling through and ran between us so that he could claim a specific horse.

The moment had been broken.

We got off the carousel and decided it was time to go home.

36: N _ _ _ I

Diego

Nikki had the day off so we decided it was the perfect day to go to the beach. I carried her into the water as she kicked and screamed and then I tossed her in. She surfaced and splashed a lot of water at me in retaliation. She went back under the water to try and pull me down, but I was too strong and she had to give up which made her mad. So she splashed me more. Elvis was there to document it all with his new waterproof camera.

When the clouds started to move in, we decided to find solace in the beachside restaurant that was on a pier a few feet away from us. We gathered our things and headed to the restaurant where we were seated just in time to see the rain fall. We split a combination appetizer while we waited for our food.

“So how’s Nelli doing?” Elvis asked me. Nikki had ordered a virgin piña colada and was sloshing it around with her straw as she tried to get it the consistency she preferred.

“She’s doing good,” I told him. “She’s been really busy.”

“Can’t she only work so many hours a day?” Elvis asked.

“Yeah. But I guess her mom has her busy doing other stuff throughout the day. You know, meeting with agents and directors about possible projects and stuff.”

“I bet you miss her,” Nikki said.

I looked at her to see if she was being serious. The truth was that I did miss Nelli. Each time I would start to paint a picture, I would envision how she would look in that setting, what she would be doing, what she would be wearing, and how the sun would shine on her features.

“I do,” I said.

However, the truth also was that I was having a pretty great summer with Nikki.

“It’s just one more month,” Elvis said. “The summer’s going by fast.”

It *was* going by fast. And while I wanted to hold onto as much of it as possible, I also wanted it to go by quicker so that I could have Nelli back already. This whole thing was just confusing. It probably didn’t help that I had a suspicion that something was wrong with Nelli. I could hear it in her voice. She was stressed and upset. She was hiding something, but there was nothing I could do for her from so far away.

“I can’t believe it,” Nikki said. “I mean, we’re going to be seniors. Us! It’s crazy.”

“It is crazy,” I agreed. “I don’t feel like someone who should be a senior in high school.”

“I do,” Elvis said. “I am so ready to be done with school. I want to get my photography career going.”

“As much as I’m looking forward to college, I kind of want to hold onto high school,” Nikki said. “It’s funny because last year if you had asked me, I would’ve said get me out of there, but now that it’s so real and so close, I don’t want it to end.”

“I want school to end,” I said. “I just don’t want anything else to end if that makes sense.”

“It does,” Nikki said.

After we were done eating, the rain had left and the sun was shining again, so Nikki decided to lay out on the beach to work on her tan. I went to walk out to the edge of the pier so I could sit down and draw the endless water and the sailboats in the distance. I dropped my backpack beside me and pulled out my sketchpad then noticed something fall right beside me. It was the D + N charm, and I picked it up and wondered why it was haunting me. I turned it over a few times and then felt like I was no longer alone. I shoved the charm back into my backpack.

“Mind if I join you for a few?” Elvis asked.

I told him to go right ahead, so he sat beside me on the pier. He asked to borrow some paper and a pencil and I gave it to him, then I focused on

drawing the water and the waves. I had determined some time ago that it was difficult to draw water, especially the calm, blue water that I was looking at right now. What helped was when there were some clouds lingering, because it gave a point of reference in the sky. What also helped was when the boats would sail, causing waves to swell and create small froths of white on the surface. Regardless of these factors, it was still one of my favorite things to draw.

“So I couldn’t help but notice that you drew Nikki at Vizcaya,” Elvis said, breaking my concentration. I had to think for a moment to remember what he was talking about.

“Oh, in the secret garden? Yeah.”

“What was that about?”

It was about something?

“I just thought it was a cool image,” I shrugged. “Drawing someone drawing something else.”

“You don’t tend to just draw people like that,” Elvis said. I hadn’t been aware that he was a critic of my work. “You draw natural things, yes, but when it comes to people, you only tend to draw those you’re inspired by.”

“I was inspired by a scene. Why are you bringing this up?”

“Just a theory I have,” he said.

He handed me the paper I had given him and on it he had written my name, and then he had drawn a heart, and then underneath he had written the letter “N” with three blank spaces and then the letter “i”. He got up and left me alone and I watched him leave before I turned my attention back to this weird puzzle he had left me.

I didn’t know what Elvis was trying to prove, and I didn’t know what he was trying to get at, so I put the paper under my drawing and tried to get back to it. Only now I was distracted, and even the waves taunted me as I swore the water spoke and sounded like it was saying someone’s name. I focused on the clouds instead, but suddenly they looked like letters and I was pretty sure that the intense salty scent of the sea was getting to my head and making me delusional.

I put my sketchpad away and caught the glimmer of the charm at the bottom of my backpack. I grabbed the charm, and then closed up my bag and stood up. I turned it over in my fingers again and thought about the confessions Nikki and I had made to each other. She broke up with me because she didn’t think I had reciprocated what she had felt. It was a test, like all the others, and I had failed, but she should’ve known I would fail

because I always sucked at tests. Nelli never tested me like that. I looked again at the D + N, and then I looked at the paper that Elvis had left me. I folded the charm into the paper and placed it in my backpack, then I went to go hang out with Elvis and Nikki.

Nikki

My SAT scores were through the roof. I ran around the house screaming before sitting back down at my computer to look at them again. When mom got home from work, I ran to her and threw my arms around her which almost caused us to go falling on the floor. Then I screamed and clapped and went running around the house again. She must've thought I was a lunatic.

"Am I going to get an explanation for this behavior, or do I just ignore it and pretend it never happened?" she asked as she put her things down.

"SAT!" I said.

"They finally came in?" Mom said as her eyes widened. "What happened? What did you get?"

I took some breaths to calm down, but once I told her my score, I screamed again, and this time mom screamed too. Then we both ran around the house, screaming, and jumping, and flailing our arms like we had no common sense. We finally collapsed on the couches in the den and started laughing so hard that I fell out of the couch. If someone had walked in right then, they would've committed the both of us.

"We have to celebrate," mom said standing up.

"Pizza rolls and popcorn?" I asked.

"Whatever you want," she said. She helped me up from the floor and hugged me tight while giving me a big smooch on the cheek.

"I can't believe it," I said. "I can't believe it."

"I can," she said.

She went to make the pizza rolls and popcorn. I ran to my room to find my cell phone. I called Diego first to tell him and then Elvis. They were both very excited for me, but obviously they couldn't really understand the level of freak-out this required. In fact, I was so over the top excited that I even called Nelli, but she didn't pick up so I just left her a way too excited message. I ran into the kitchen to keep jumping up and down as mom put the pizza rolls in the oven.

"They have to take me right? They just have to."

“I’m sure they will.”

“I’m going to apply for Early Decision.”

“I think that’s a great idea. That should really inspire them to take you.”

I took a deep breath and thought about this. If I applied for Early Decision then they would know that they were my only choice. If I got straight A’s my senior year, then I would definitely retain my title as number one in the class, and with my SAT scores this was looking more certain by the minute. Now all I needed was to make sure this portfolio was perfect. If there was only a way I could see how everyone else’s portfolio looked like, it would just make it so much easier. How frustrating.

I wasn’t going to worry about that right now though. The popcorn was ready and I was too excited to think about anything other than my awesome SAT score.

Nelli

I had a stalker. I stared at Luc, trying to make sure that it was really him and that my imagination wasn’t playing tricks on me. One of my co-stars had invited me to go to a house party with her and there I was, and there Luc was. He saw me and walked over to me, taking his time, as if he wasn’t worried that I would run in the opposite direction.

“What are you doing here?” I asked him when he reached me. He looked at me funny as if he should’ve been the one asking the question.

“It’s nice to see you as well,” he said. “Need a refill?”

I looked down at what had been rum and coke and mentally chided myself for being caught without liquid in my glass.

“I’ve got it,” I said, turning to head back to where the drinks were being mixed. I got my refill and he stood beside me and got his, and then I walked out to the balcony where the lights of the city twinkled and created a festive illusion.

“I didn’t know you’d be in town,” he said.

“I’m filming a movie,” I told him. “Why are you here?”

“Working on a track for a movie,” he said with a laugh as if it was kismet. I tried not to pay attention to his smile, or how his eyes looked when they squinted as he laughed. I drank my drink. “So how long are you in town for?”

“A few more weeks,” I told him. “You?”

“A few more weeks,” he said, but I was pretty sure he was lying.

“How convenient,” I said. I looked past him to see what was going on inside. People were still talking and flirting and trying to hook up. I was probably safer out here with Luc.

“You still inspire me,” he said. I looked back at his eyes and noticed that somehow he had gotten closer to me.

“I inspire a lot of people.” I used to enjoy that fact. Now I was annoyed by it.

“I haven’t stopped thinking about you.” Now his face was way closer and his hand was on the railing right beside me. His voice was softer because he was close enough for me to hear him whisper.

“I haven’t stopped thinking about my boyfriend,” I challenged back. He smiled and didn’t move away.

“That little boy? He has nothing to offer you.”

I scoffed, “And you do?”

“You know what I’ve got. You’re wasting your time with him. Look at you. You’re going to be someone, and you’re going to need to be with someone who is going to be someone. Do you think he’s going to give you the life that you’re used to? You can give him the world. What can he give you? Nothing.”

“That’s not true,” I said. I got a lot from Diego. I just couldn’t think of what that was right now because Luc was even closer and now his hand was on my lower back.

“Let me show you what you could have,” he said. He kissed me and I didn’t want to push him away. I wanted to taste his kiss, experience it, really fall into it and see what he did have to offer because I had been wondering that since the night I had met him at the club.

His kiss was intoxicating, like the drink that had flavored his tongue and lips. He left me breathless when he pulled away, and I kept my eyes closed because I was remembering the soft touch of his lips and the powerful way he had been able to use them. Then I laughed because this was silly, and that’s when I pushed him away again. I drank more of my rum and Coke and turned to face the city lights.

“I’m starting to think you like to push me away just to amuse yourself,” he said as he leaned on the railing.

“I’m starting to think you like to kiss me just to amuse yourself,” I said back.

We then drank in silence for a few moments, and when he had finished downing his drink, he shook his head and said, "I can't do this."

He must have seen the look of confusion on my face because he sighed and stood up straighter, looking like someone who was hoping the right words would come to him.

"You can't do what?"

"I don't want to hurt you," Luc said. He looked at me in a way that made me stay still in my spot and listen to him. "Your mom told me that you liked me and that I had a chance with you." My heart beat faster.

"My mom?"

"She's the one who told me to come to L.A. She said she wanted me out here so that I could take your mind off your boyfriend. She wants us to be together. That's why she fought so hard against your dad for you to be in the video. Your dad told me he didn't want you in the video, and I respected that, but then your mom came into the picture and convinced your dad that you needed to be in it for your career."

I don't know how I found my voice at that moment.

"Did she tell you to kiss me in the club scene?" I asked.

"She told me to do whatever was necessary to make you mine."

I felt my knees begin to waver.

"And you did it? Why did you do that?" My emotions began to tumble around each other as they fought for dominance.

"Because I wanted you and because I thought maybe you wanted me, and because your mom.... Well she made it pretty clear that she could tell your dad to terminate my contract if I didn't play by her rules. I'm really sorry, Nelli. But this is my dream. I've wanted this my whole life, and your mom scared me. I'm really sorry."

I suddenly wondered if there was any moment in my life that my mom had actually cared about me. Just me. Just Nelli. Not the pretty daughter, not the daughter that she could parade around, not the daughter she could make money off of, but just the daughter that liked to dance and believed in her parents and believed that everything would always be okay. Why had she done this to me?

I said nothing to Luc. I had nothing to say. I somehow had enough strength to leave the party, find my car keys, and drive myself through the winding roads of the Hollywood Hills. The tears came fast and I wiped the ones I could while thinking about how I didn't understand my mom, how I

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had just kissed Luc, how Diego would be so mad and disappointed, and most of all, how much I missed Papi.

37: HOMECOMING

Nelli

Papi knew something was wrong when I held onto him tight at the airport and didn't want to let go. It was like I was in elementary school all over again, and I wanted him to fix my boo-boo or not leave me alone in my kindergarten class. He held onto me as well until Trace cleared his throat, then I threw my arms around him almost as fast.

I wasn't questioned until I was back at home, in my very own room, unpacking my things. Normally I'd leave it and let Felipa just take care of it for me, but I needed to feel like I was a part of my home again. I needed to confirm that this is where I belonged, and this is where I was meant to be. I pulled out the gifts I had bought for Nikki, Elvis, and Diego and set them on my bed. I couldn't wait to give them their things and see their reactions.

"Knock knock," Papi said as he knocked on my half-open door. "You know Felipa can do that."

"I know," I said. I continued to pull out clothes as he walked to my bed and sat on the edge while looking at me.

"Your mother refuses to pick up my calls," he said. I stopped moving and just held the skirt in my hand. I didn't know what to say to him because I didn't want Papi to be as hurt as I was. He didn't deserve it.

"You were right," I said as my voice broke a little. "She's not coming back."

"I'm sorry, baby. I didn't want you to be hurt by any of this. I'm surprised she let you come back at all."

“She didn’t have a choice.” I faced Papi and I knew he could see the disappointment in my brown eyes. I wish he could’ve been blind at that moment.

“What do you mean?”

“This was my decision. She betrayed my trust.”

Papi looked ready to jump to his feet and find Mami so he could strangle her, but somehow he remained seated on my bed.

“What do you mean she betrayed your trust?”

I moved to sit beside him on the bed. I took his hand to keep him calm. “I’ll tell you, but first you have to promise me that you won’t take this out on anyone. I don’t want anyone else to get hurt.”

“What did she do to you?” His scared eyes searched mine for answers.

“Promise me.”

“I promise. What did she do?”

And so I told him. I told him about how Mami had scared Luc into trying to seduce me away from Diego. I told him about how Mami set the whole thing up so I could stay in California and live out her dreams. And I told him how I almost fell for it because I was lonely, and I missed everyone, and Luc reminded me of home.

I didn’t realize I was crying until Papi pulled me into him and held me, rocking me back and forth. I felt sad, but I didn’t feel sad for myself. I felt sad for Papi, and Luc, and Diego, and all the people that I had helped Mami hurt by believing that she would never hurt me.

Nikki

Nelli was back. I wasn’t sure how I was supposed to react to this, but I pretended to be excited which wasn’t hard because I truly wanted her opinion on all the super-duper-I’m-a-senior-move-out-of-the-way-I’m-coming-through outfits that I had bought this week. I may have killed my mom’s credit card, but I justified it by reasoning with myself that this was the last time I would ever get to do this. This was the last time I would be parading around in high school, strutting down the halls, and flipping my hair to the beat of my own drum. This was it, and I was ready for my strong finish.

I was in my closet organizing all of my new purchases. I stood back to admire my work and applauded myself quickly before hopping out to my room where Elvis sat on my bed waiting patiently.

“Well now that that’s done, I’m starving. Let’s order pizza.” I grabbed my phone from the dresser and started dialing.

“I thought we were waiting to see if Nelli wanted to meet up with us tonight,” Elvis reminded me.

“Oh right. Forgot. Silly me.” I put the phone back down and sat beside Elvis on the bed. “I’m sure Diego will call at any minute to let us know what’s going on.”

“How upset are you about this?”

I laughed. Elvis was so silly.

“Why would I be upset? I missed Nelli. I’m sure you did too.”

“You just spent a whole summer with Diego by yourself. He spent all his free time at the bagel shop for you, and you almost kissed him twice, and now his girlfriend is back. I can’t imagine why you’d be upset.”

I didn’t laugh this time. Elvis was so depressing.

“I don’t want to talk about it.” I stood up and headed back to my dresser to grab my brush. Brushing my hair always solved everything.

“You’re going to have to confront this issue.” Elvis was relentless. “Nelli is back. How are you going to feel when we have to hang out with them, and Diego and her pick up right where they left off acting like the couple they were before she left?”

“I can handle that. I mean, I wasn’t expecting things to be different when she got back.” That was such a lie and Elvis knew it.

“Right. So then this whole summer was what exactly? Was it retribution or your last attempt to get Diego back?”

“Are you trying to make me cry?” I turned to him, brush in my hand, holding back my emotions. Elvis may have been being honest, but he was also being mean. I had already thought of these things, and I was tired of thinking about them. “Look. If Diego had wanted me, he would’ve told me at Boomers! on the carousel.” Even now when I thought back to that moment, I thought it was one of the most perfect moments to ever happen in my life. I hated Diego. “I’m not delusional, Elvis. I never stood a chance in his eyes. Not with Nelli in the picture. This whole summer, in the back of my head, even when it was just him and me, I always knew she was in the picture.”

“So then why did you do it? Why did you go there with him knowing you’d end up hurt in the end?”

“Because sometimes you just take what you can get. You know, like how you’re my friend even though you wanted more at one point.” I shrugged.

Elvis understood and he dropped the subject for a moment, but as we moved out into the den to watch TV while we waited for news from Diego, Elvis asked me, “Is this going to keep happening? Are you going to keep trying to get moments like that from Diego every time that Nelli goes out of town for something? Or even when she is in town?”

It hurt that he felt he needed to ask me that. How horrible Elvis must think of me. He thought I was the other woman, but that’s not what it was at all. In fact, in the back of my mind, I knew the entire time that if Diego didn’t take me back by the end of the summer that he never would.

I shook my head no. If I had said the word I would’ve cried.

Diego

I had waited all day to see Nelli again. I placed my latest pieces front and center in the middle of the studio so she could see them when she walked right in. I wanted her to see that I had been thinking of her while she had been gone. I wanted her to see just how much I had missed her. But deep down inside I knew that I felt guilty and wanted her to not figure out that I had enjoyed spending the whole summer with Nikki.

However, when she arrived, she suggested meeting her up on the roof instead. She didn’t want to come into the studio, but she didn’t tell me why. I went up to the roof to wait for her, sitting on the ledge and sensing that it might rain at any moment. I wiped the beads of humidity from my forehead and watched the clouds race along the night sky. When Nelli joined me she looked radiant. She walked toward me in a summer dress, illuminated only by the flood lights reflecting off the top of the building. I pushed off from the ledge and enveloped her in a hug, giving her a soft kiss before taking a step back to take her in. She looked past me as if her mind was in a million different places.

“I missed you,” I said.

“I missed you too.”

She didn’t smile. She walked to the ledge and looked over for a brief second before sitting. I sat beside her, facing her, concerned.

“What’s wrong?” I searched her brown eyes for an answer, but they were as silent as she was. “I knew something was wrong,” I told her. “When I would talk to you on the phone, I knew something was wrong. I could hear it in your voice. What happened out there?”

“Nothing. Everything.” She fought to put on a smile and took my hand. I don’t know why I felt like my heart was breaking. I had seen Nelli sad before. This seemed different.

“Part of me thought you wouldn’t come back. Part of me thought you would stay out there and become a big movie star and forget all about us.”

“That’s what Mami wanted.” She pulled her hand away, but scooted closer to me and grabbed my arm, leaning on it for support as she put her head on my shoulder. I could smell her flowery perfume, its scent muted only slightly by its mixture with the humidity. “She wanted me to stay there with her forever. She wanted me to be her little movie star, always on the red carpet, always on stage, always on camera. I don’t think she ever really wanted a daughter.”

So this was all about her mother? I felt the pit of my stomach drop a bit. I could only imagine what that woman had done to Nelli.

“That can’t be true.” I wished I had something better or more comforting to say.

“It is true. She sold me. Or she tried to. She sold me to whoever could make the things she wanted happen, and by the time I found out, it was too late. I had already been caught up in everything she wanted, everything she had laid out.” Then she told me a story that seemed too insane to be true.

A story where she flirted with directors, had lunches with agent after agent after agent, and finally where she kissed Luc before he told her that he was just another of her mother’s pawns. Like she was. Like I was.

“I couldn’t even confront Mami that night,” she continued. She didn’t stop to assess if I was upset. She couldn’t stop. The words poured out of her. “I had to wait until the movie was over because I couldn’t let her suspect that I was done with her. I didn’t want her to do anything to sabotage me any longer. So I stayed quiet and played the part. The day the film wrapped, I packed my bags, and I told her I was leaving and that I was never coming back. I told Mami...I told my mother that I never wanted to see her again. I got in the cab, even after she tried to run after me, and I never looked back.”

I knew I was supposed to say something, but I felt dizzy and my stomach kept flipping. My chest hurt like I was holding onto my breath and suppressing it with a heavy metal object. She pulled away from me and looked at me. I was surprised to see that she hadn’t shed a single tear. I imagined she had cried them all out.

“I wish I could say I’m surprised to hear that,” I finally said. It wasn’t comforting, but it was the truth.

“Do you hate me?”

I shook my head without hesitation. “You were manipulated.”

“But I kissed Luc.”

“You said it was because you missed me.”

“I did. But I did it.” She stared at me.

Nelli was pointing this out because she wanted to know what I had been up to all summer. She was being honest too. I wished she had never gone away in the first place then none of this would have happened and this conversation wouldn't have been necessary.

“Did you want him?”

“I don't know. I was attracted to him, but he's not you. He said something to me that night that I thought a lot about on the plane. He said that I should be with someone like him. Someone that could offer me more, but after what Mami did....” She let out a deep breath and searched for the words in the sky before looking at me again. “I don't want to be the girl who needs someone that could offer me more. I want to be like Nikki. I want to be the girl who doesn't need anyone, but who has someone who loves her and respects her for who she is without ever thinking that he has to be something for me.”

For a moment, I thought there was no way Nelli could ever be like Nikki in that regard, but considering how much they were alike in other areas, why couldn't they be alike in that way as well? And then I wondered if she thought that I wasn't anything for her. I liked to think I provided something for her needs, if even just a chance to escape from her life.

“Tell me, Diego,” she said, “was I ever anything to you other than a great inspiration?”

The question was full of more self-awareness than I was prepared for. I hesitated than said, “That's not all you were to me. You were more.”

“I want to believe you.”

I wanted her to believe me too, but then I thought about the summer and I thought about how beautiful Nikki looked on the beach working on her tan, and how beautiful she looked behind the counter of the bagel shop throwing her big smile at customers, and how beautiful she looked at Boomers! on that carousel as we spun around with the ting of the carousel music floating around us. Did any of that matter now that Nelli was sitting so close to me, vulnerable, begging for me to let her be just like the girl who had made my entire summer less lonely?

“I wish you hadn’t left,” I said. I had a feeling she knew why. Even if she didn’t know what had happened, she could sense that something had.

“I bet you had a fun summer with Nikki.”

“And Elvis,” I tried to add, but that was for no one’s benefit. We both knew the truth.

“What happened?”

“Nothing.” Nothing had happened. Yet everything had happened. Just like her in Los Angeles. “I was lonely too, but nothing happened. We didn’t kiss or anything.” She looked away. I shook my head and tried to explain. “I’m not judging you or throwing it in your face. There were moments where it could’ve happened. We just didn’t. I guess it wasn’t meant to be.”

She looked at me again. “Did you want it to be meant to be?”

That was a harder question to answer. It was Nikki. Nothing I did with her should count against me. She was my best friend. There had to be passes for that kind of thing. I felt sticky from the humidity, and I could feel my shirt dampen by the second.

“Let’s go inside,” I said. “It’s about to rain.”

“I’m not going in that studio. I should probably go home anyway.”

“No. Nelli, don’t go. Listen. I don’t know what happened this summer. I’m confused about a lot of things. I couldn’t stop thinking about you while you were gone, but while I was with her.... I feel strongly for the both of you. I don’t know what to do. I really don’t.” I hated myself for being so honest at that moment. Why didn’t I just lie to her? It would’ve been easier.

I could see her bite her lip, and then she said, “You promised me that you wouldn’t find new inspiration.”

I felt like the worst person on the planet.

“I didn’t,” I said, looking at her. “I just re-found the inspiration that’s been there all along.” I realized after I said it that what I had said would just make things worse. Nelli stood up and I knew I couldn’t stop her now, but I had learned my lesson and I followed her all the way to her car.

I put my hand on the driver’s side door so she couldn’t open it and I stood there, now able to see her better under the illumination of the street lights.

“Nelli, what’s going on here? I don’t want to lose you.”

“You can’t have the best of both worlds, Diego,” she said. “And trust me, a couple of months ago I might’ve told you different. I always thought you could have anything you want, but now I know better. Everything comes at a price. Just think about it. If you could have both me and Nikki, what would

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you have to give up? What would you lose in the process? Because it's always something whether we know it or not.”

I took my hand off her car door and watched her slide into her seat. She shut the door while I stood there shocked. The Nelli that left to go to California was not the same Nelli that had just driven away from me.

38: ALL GROWN UP

Nikki

After Diego told us that Nelli couldn't hang out when she got back, I called her to make plans for her to hang out at my place the following day. I thought that going over my new school clothes would be the best way to catch back up, even though when I had told Diego this he had looked dubious. I had tried to find out from him how she was doing and what had happened when he had seen her, but he had said nothing, and I assumed it was because they were already back to being a couple. I hated not being part of his world.

While I was heating up some frozen egg rolls, the doorbell rang. I rushed to the door, and threw it open as I gave Nelli a super-big-totally-missed-you-welcome-back hug.

"Hey," she said when I finally let her go. She handed me a shopping bag with very luxurious lettering in cursive on the side.

"Oh my God," I said knowing that logo anywhere. She had brought me back something from an exclusive Hollywood boutique! I led her to the kitchen and pulled out a stripey, colorful top I had seen in one of my fashion magazines. "I love it!" I jumped up and down and hugged her again.

Nelli smiled and seemed to be pleased by my reaction. "It was very you," she said, leaning against the counter as she let her fingertips graze over the countertop. "I hope it fits."

I looked at the size and held it up to myself. "I think it will. I'll make it fit, don't worry. So how was it? Did you love it out there?"

Nelli seemed to think a little too long about how to answer that, but then she said, “I missed home. I’m happy to be back.”

Something was very off here. There was a reason Diego hadn’t said anything. Now that was clear. But what had happened?

“Well we missed you too.”

“Did you?” Nelli looked right at me.

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Diego told me about your summer.”

Why would he do that? Was he crazy? And she still gave me the shirt? I had underestimated Nelli.

“Trust me,” I said, putting the shirt back in the bag in preparation of having to give it back to her, “nothing happened.”

“That doesn’t change that you both wanted something to happen.”

We both did? Had he told her that? I pushed the bag across the counter and started to cross my arms then realized that would look too defensive. So I put my hands on the counter just like she had hers.

“It doesn’t matter. He forgot all about me the moment you came back into town. You’re the one he wants.”

“Diego doesn’t know what he wants. Or who he wants,” she said with a shrug. “I told him he had to make a decision.”

“Wait, he told you that?” My heart leapt and I felt an excitement spring up within me.

She looked at me, reading my mind no doubt. “Yeah.”

I couldn’t believe she had come over to tell me that. Then I realized that made less sense than I had even thought. “You didn’t come over to tell me that did you?”

“I came over because I realized a few things while I was coming back from L.A. Do you know that you’re like the only real friend I have? Well you, and Diego, and Elvis.”

“But we’re not really your friends.”

I saw the small flash of pain cross her face, but she recovered well and said, “I know. But you guys are the closest. Regardless of what Diego decides, I really want us to be friends. You and me.”

She had misunderstood me and I shook my head and said, “No, you don’t understand. What you did to me last summer, I can’t just forget that. And you can’t ignore that I was willing to do something similar to you this summer. I don’t have a problem being acquaintances with you, or shopping buddies, or whatever, but friends are people you have to be able to trust.

Elvis, is a great friend. Diego used to once be a pretty good one. You're...just...not."

"Wow." Nelli looked away.

Wow was right. I couldn't believe how honest I had been. But I knew why I had said that. A lot had changed, and I wasn't playing a game with her, or Diego, or anyone anymore. I would've kissed Diego over the summer once, twice, as many times as possible. I did flirt with him on the beach, and at the bagel shop, and on the bus. I had put my emotions out there for him again, and I didn't care if Nelli had been hurt in the process. In fact, I wanted her to be hurt. I wanted her to hurt as much as she had hurt me. Why did she get to get away with it and get the boy too?

I felt my face pale at my sudden realization.

I was no different than her.

"I guess," I said, taking a deep breath, "that we can just keep hanging out and see what happens."

Nelli nodded without really looking at me, and I smelled burning egg rolls from the oven. I hurried to take them out and fanned the burnt smell that now wafted around me. I put them on a plate and set it on the counter between us.

"As you can see, in the time you've been gone, my cooking hasn't improved," I said, hoping to break the tension. She didn't smile but she did pick at the corner of the egg roll closest to her.

"I'm scared to go back to school," she said. "You're lucky you're a senior. I have two more years left, and it's going to be awful."

"Why do you say that?"

"Because I don't want to hang out with the people I've been hanging out with my whole life. I don't want to deal with their expectations of me. I don't feel like the same person."

"Screw their expectations. Just be who you want to be."

She looked at me and her brown eyes glistened as she fought back emotional tears. "I don't know how. I've spent my whole life being who my mom wants me to be. I don't know how to be who I want to be."

"It's really not that hard," I started to say, but she rubbed her eyes and turned away and I knew that something horrible must've happened. "Nelli, what's wrong?"

"I need your help," she said as her face flushed. "I need you to help me figure out how to be me. You're so good at it. You know exactly who you are and what you want. I mean, it's like you just have yourself completely

figured out. You've never been anyone's puppet. I want you to help me be like you."

This was so weird. I'm pretty sure my face looked more confused than I imagined it to look. But her brown eyes pleaded and it was almost pitiful. I actually felt bad for her.

"I don't think I can help you with that, but I guess I can try?"

She nodded and said thank you, and then she picked up her burnt egg roll but then thought better of it and put it down. Then, in the weirdest turn of events, we both laughed.

Diego

I stared at the painting of Nelli on the beach. She stood looking over her shoulder at the sunset that was descending upon the water. It had been the last painting I had worked on in the studio, and it was the last one I was loading into Billy's truck.

"Is that it?" He asked as he swiped his hands against each other.

"Yeah, that was the last one."

Billy nodded and put his hands on his hips then looked up at the building. "Are you gonna miss it?"

I shook my head. It had never felt mine. "I should've done this sooner. I wish I had. I wish I had just realized from the beginning and never taken it in the first place."

"Now you know for the next time," Billy said. He put his hand on my shoulder and gave it a good squeeze. "You have to take chances and make mistakes in order to learn anything in life. Now you go forward and never look back. You're headed to a better place right?"

A way better place: high school with Nikki, AP art classes, and then hopefully art college. For once in my life, I liked thinking about my future.

"Do you mind if I meet you at the house?" I asked Billy. "I want to take a quick detour on the bus."

Billy nodded and left with all my paintings in his possession. I felt robbed and naked as I turned and headed to the bus stop. I didn't know where I wanted to go at first so I just sat in a window seat and watched the blocks pass by as I thought about nothing at all. But then my mind betrayed me and started thinking about everything at once. I pressed my palm to my forehead and tried to make it stop.

Before I knew it was stumbling off the bus and straight into Mario's studio, not even sure if he would be there. Lucky for me, he was. And even luckier for me, he pulled a stool out for me before I could take more than a few steps into his studio.

"You look like hell," he said.

I sat on the stool and tried to focus on him. I had a huge headache and there was a dull pain welling up near my chest, but I tried to ignore it as I started speaking.

"I'm not taking any more lessons from you. I just wanted to tell you that. And I thought it'd be better to tell you in person. So I'm here."

Mario stood with his arms lazily crossed as he looked down at me. "You've learned everything you need to know then?"

"No," I said with a curt shake of my head. "And I probably never will. But I do know that someone has to be paying you to do this for me, and I know that person must've been Nelli's mom. She's out of the picture now, or, she's at least out of mine, so I'm not taking anything else from her."

"That's fair," he said.

"I never should've in the first place."

"Then why did you?"

I looked at him, letting out a breath. It was probably a good sign that I could do at least that at the moment.

"I wanted to be with Nelli. I did whatever it took to be with her."

"So has that changed?"

"It's complicated."

Mario laughed and sat on the table that held his newest still life. The lemons had been exchanged for peaches, and I had the desire to see the painting that Mario had been creating from it.

"It's always so easy to say it's complicated, isn't it?"

"No, I mean," my eyes darted around the room, hoping an explanation made itself clear, "I realized, for the first time in my life, that I'm in love. But, the problem is, I'm in love with two different girls. And I know that sounds like male chauvinistic or whatever, or maybe it sounds to you like I'm being flippant, but I'm not. I can't imagine my life without both Nelli and Nikki in it, but I know I can't have both because that wouldn't be fair to either. So I have to pick one."

"And you're sure your choice isn't clear?" Mario said this in a way that felt more like a warning than a question.

"What do you mean?"

“For example, sometimes when you’re painting, you come to a crossroads when you know you’re about to paint something and it has to be a specific color, but there are two colors that would work just as equally as well, and you like both of those colors, but you know, in order for that painting to truly be the masterpiece you intend it to be, you must choose the one that fits perfectly. It doesn’t mean you love the other color less, in fact, you could’ve just as easily chosen that color and created a great painting with it, but it’s not the color that belongs. It’s not the color that completes the piece.”

“But how do I know what the right color is?”

“Instinct. That’s what you use when you paint isn’t it? Love’s not that different. You already know who you want. Just trust yourself to choose her.”

Mario had no idea what he was talking about. I didn’t know who I wanted, and my instinct was to tell them both that we had to move to the island and live happily ever after. I left Mario’s studio feeling more confused, more hopeless, and with a bigger headache.

Nelli

I got home from Nikki’s and found Papi in the den watching a baseball game.

“Felipa made some shrimp and rice if you’re hungry.”

“I ate at Nikki’s,” I said. I took off my shoes and curled up on the couch with the pillow.

“Did you have fun?”

“Yeah, I did,” I said and gave him a smile to prove it.

It hadn’t been so bad once we had moved on from our awkward conversation and focused instead on her senior year wardrobe. I had been pretty impressed with her selections, and the shirt I had gotten her in L.A. was going to be the centerpiece of it all. I realized that I hadn’t even bothered to get my wardrobe together for the school year. It would be weird going back-to-school shopping without Mami by my side telling me what looked good on me and didn’t.

“Good,” Papi said. He muted the TV so he could give me his full attention. “So I’ve been thinking about your birthday. It’s coming up and I want to do something special for you, but I’m not sure how you feel about that with everything being as it is.”

VIZCAYA

“I don’t want a big party,” I rushed to say. He put his hands up as if surrendering to a cop.

“Okay no big party. That’s why I’m asking you. You don’t have to have any party at all if you don’t want.”

“Really?” That thought had never occurred to me. Mami always insisted that I should have multiple parties on my birthday if possible. Usually she’d insist on one for the family, one for family and family friends, and one just for me and my friends. No parties sounded weird.

“Anything you want,” Papi said. “It’s your seventeenth birthday. You should celebrate it how you want.”

I thought for a moment and then smiled. I knew exactly how I wanted to spend my seventeenth birthday.

“I want to do a private party at Vizcaya.”

“Vizcaya?” Papi said.

“Yeah, but private. I just want it to be you, and Trace, Felipa, Diego, Nikki, and Elvis. I want us to eat lunch by the water and then play Monopoly. And that’s it.”

Papi had a smirk on his face. “You want Felipa there?”

I nodded. “She’s family. She should be there.”

“Alright then.”

He motioned for me to come over to him and I scooted over on the couch and let him pull me in and place a small kiss on the top of my head. I rested against him with a smile on my face, happy that I had chosen how I wanted to go into this new year of my life.

39: MEMENTOS

Nikki

Surreal. That's how it felt to be back at Vizcaya for Nelli's birthday. I couldn't believe that she was turning seventeen. Our little Nelli, all grown up, and to think that when we had met her she had technically been fourteen. It was too crazy to think about.

I had gone through fifteen outfits that morning before settling on the shirt she had brought me back from LA with a cute pair of jeans. I had to concede that today was once again all about her, so I wouldn't try to upstage her and would just look my best so that we could take awesome pictures together. Well that had mostly been Elvis' idea since he said this would be a great opportunity for us to do a photo shoot for his portfolio. But either way, I looked great and we were at Vizcaya on a sunny-super-blue-and-slightly-breezy day.

Diego, Elvis, and I walked out to the table that had been set up to the left of where the stone boat was eternally moored. Nelli's dad was already sitting there and he pointed at me.

"Nikki," he said.

"Wow, you remembered my name," I said very impressed.

"I remember everything." He then looked at Elvis.

"Hello, sir," Elvis said. His camera bag strap fell off his shoulder and he struggled to get it back up before losing his grip on the bag altogether.

“Elvis,” he said. Then from under his napkin at the table, he pulled out the demo that we had given Nelli. “The same Elvis singing on this?”

“Yeah, that’s me.”

“You’ve got a great voice on you.”

“Thank you, sir.”

“Unfortunately, I’m not in the business of great voices.”

“I understand,” Elvis said slightly defeated. His strap fell again and I took the camera bag away from him before he could cause it any damage.

“The music industry isn’t about music. It’s about marketability.”

“I’m well aware, sir.”

“I can only sign people who I know will bring in money.”

“I’m just honored that you listened to the demo. I know you’re a busy guy.”

“I am a busy guy. I’m glad you acknowledge that.”

“Yes sir.”

I looked at Diego who seemed to be smirking, and I figured it was because he was glad that someone else was getting a “talk” instead of him.

“So why was this demo in my office?”

“I’m trying to get a record contract, sir.”

“Do you think you’re marketable?”

“Not really, sir.”

“Yikes, wrong answer,” I whispered to Diego.

“You obviously don’t know Nelli’s dad,” he said as he now smiled at the situation.

“What kind of artist do you want to be?” Nelli’s dad leaned back in his chair as he waited for Elvis to respond.

“A very low-key one, sir.”

“Like maybe a backup singer who writes songs on the side and releases an album every now and then when the market is right?”

“Exactly like that,” Elvis said and now I was smiling.

“I think we understand each other.”

“I think we do.”

“Stop by my office tomorrow. And you might want to find a good lawyer who knows how to read a music contract.”

“Thank you, sir.”

Nelli’s dad then stood from his chair. I was hopping so he looked at me strangely, but I didn’t care. I ran over to him and hugged him because he was awesome. Then I ran back to where I had been standing.

Nelli's dad pointed to me, looked at Diego, and said, "No cake for her." Then he left us alone as he went to find Nelli to let her know we had arrived.

"Did that just happen?" Elvis asked me

"It so just happened," I said as I gave him the biggest hug ever and a kiss on the cheek. "I'm going to go to all your concerts, and buy all your music, and run your fansite."

Diego congratulated Elvis as well. He gave him a quick hug and said, "That's really cool, man. You got what you wanted."

"I did," Elvis said. He still looked shocked. "How did that happen?"

"Nelli," I said. "She wanted to do it for you."

"I don't think I'll ever be able to thank her enough."

"I think she'll just be happy to know it worked out," Diego assured him.

Then we both hugged Elvis again at the same time, excited about his future.

Nelli

I was very excited about my birthday celebration. It was the first time any of my parties had ever felt like a real personal experience, and I knew I had the people with me at Vizcaya to thank for that. I had on a simple, white, summer dress. It was one that Mami would have said was too plain for the event, but I loved it and thought it was perfect. After all, I wanted a simple birthday. I wanted everything for the rest of the year to just be simple.

I hugged Nikki, Diego, and Elvis when I saw them at the table, and soon we were sitting and enjoying our lunch while the bay water lapped against the stone steps beside us. After our lunch, I walked to the gazebo with Papi. The others were already in there, setting up the Monopoly board and arguing about who was going to be the banker. I took in the scene for a moment and smiled as I felt myself already get emotional. But this time it was in a good way.

They had tied balloons around the gazebo and a small folding table was in the corner with presents and the prettiest cake I had ever seen. I hugged everyone for a long time and then I looked at the three tiered cake that was smooth and white like a perfectly pressed soft blanket. It had pink trimmings all around it, with little pink roses, a tiara on top, and a lone candle. I hugged Papi because I had a feeling that he had picked it out for me instead of sending Felipa to do it.

“You like it?” he asked.

“I love it,” I affirmed.

“Hey, you haven’t met our latest artist,” Papi said to me. “His name is Edgar.”

“Edgar?” I asked. “Just Edgar? That’s not really marketable, Papi.”

“Yeah well neither is he,” he said. He looked over at Elvis who was just beaming.

“I’m a low-key artist,” he said. I screamed so loud and ran to give him a hug.

“Wait,” I asked as I pulled away, “Edgar?”

“That’s my real name.”

“You didn’t think his name was actually Elvis did you?” Nikki asked me. When I really thought about it, I guess I actually had.

“You guys never told me that wasn’t his real name,” I defended as I sat down beside them and picked the iron as my player piece.

“It is to us,” Diego said.

“Wait,” now I looked at them suspiciously, “are your names really Nikki and Diego?”

This caused everyone to laugh, but hey, I had to check. Papi recorded us playing Monopoly with the new digital camera he had bought me for my birthday. We played all the way through, even after Nikki refused to trade her properties to make the game go quicker.

I kept glancing at Diego and Nikki as we played, but I couldn’t see a single trace of what he could be thinking. He hadn’t mentioned making a choice, and he hadn’t really said much to me since our initial conversation. I assumed he needed time to think, but now I was anxious about it. Still, I wouldn’t trade this moment, even without him fully mine, for anything in the world.

Diego

The grown-ups had left, and Elvis and the girls were in the gardens taking pictures as they both played around for the camera. I walked back toward the water and stepped down the narrow, cracked, stone steps that led into the bay. I reached the last one that was covered mostly in water and stood with my hands in my pants pockets as I stared out at Biscayne Bay.

In the small amount of time that had passed since my conversation with Mario, I had found myself unable to draw or paint a single thing. My

inspiration had vanished and had been replaced by a heavy helplessness that came from my indecision. But then his words began to unravel themselves in my mind, and yesterday I had finally picked up my sketchbook with the intention of drawing. However, as I opened the sketchbook, a piece of paper fell out. Elvis' paper. With the fill in the blanks puzzle that had already unsettled me once before.

I hadn't been able to part with the paper since. I removed it from my pocket and glanced at it then looked over my shoulder back at the house behind me. Then I looked over to the side where the gardens glistened. It had always been like this. The house had always been the foundation, the centerpiece, the solid figure that the sea could visit and rely upon. The gardens were beautiful, but they had come later. The sea had always been there, and the house chose to look over it. Vizcaya existed because of their mutual understanding and respect.

I took my trusty pencil out from my pocket and filled in the blanks. I had known all along, just like Mario had said. I just didn't want to know it because it meant that all this would have to end.

When the photos were over, the girls packed up the Monopoly game while Elvis took one final shot of the moment. I stood beside him and handed him the piece of paper he had given me.

"What's this?" He took it.

"Your answer," I said and then I went to help the girls finish packing up the game.

I didn't have to turn around to see if he had taken a peek at whose name I had put in the blanks. I knew he did, and once the game was packed up, I stood up and looked at Nelli. Her brown eyes searched mine and I'm pretty sure in that moment she knew. Nelli just had a way of doing that.

Nelli

It was my birthday. It had been perfect. Nothing could ruin it.

Diego walked me to my car and put my presents in the trunk as I gave Nikki one more big hug. I gave one to Elvis too. Then they left and it was just me and Diego in the Vizcaya parking lot surrounded by the jungle of tropical trees that protected us from the outside world.

I played with my keys and waited for him to finish adjusting the presents. He closed the trunk and looked at me again, just as he had moments ago in

the gazebo. The right adjective for his blue eyes eluded me, but it was something that looked like a mixture of sadness and relief.

“You chose,” I said for him.

He scratched the back of his head then pulled himself onto my trunk to sit, leaning forward on his knees as he thought through his words. I leaned against the car as I looked at him.

“Don’t worry. You’re not going to ruin my birthday,” I told him, but really I was just trying to convince myself.

“You said that you wanted to be more like Nikki,” he began. I listened to each word carefully. “The thing is that you and Nikki are a lot alike. Too much alike. That’s what made this whole thing so difficult. How do you pick between two colors to use in a painting if they’re the same colors but just a slight shade different? What if you’re painting a tree and you’ve got the brown of the bark just right, but now you have to paint the leaves, and you know they’re green, but the type of green will determine whether you’ve created a masterpiece or just a nice painting?”

It was strange how I knew exactly what he meant. I said nothing and continued to listen.

“So I thought about how you two were different, and I realized the most obvious thing. Nikki’s my best friend. And before we were anything more, we were just friends. You and I never started as friends, and I’m not sure we ever really got to be friends. We jumped into something crazy together. We got caught up, and yeah, we learned a lot about each other in the process. We became closer, but that basis wasn’t there. It’s like we were floating the entire time, and neither of us cared to think about what would happen if we were to fall.”

I couldn’t say anything. It hurt to acknowledge that he was right. My throat felt like it had something stuck in it and I tried to swallow around it.

“Every moment with you was exciting, but it was also scary. It was either up or down. We never had an in between. I did fall for you Nelli, and I really don’t want to lose you, but what I want most is for you and I to find that in between. If we can.”

“You want us to be friends,” I finally spoke. My voice came out like I had been holding my breath.

“I think so.”

He looked at me as if pleading and I noticed that his blue eyes were glistening like the water he loved to stare at.

“You know it’s funny you should say you fell for me,” I said. “I don’t think I really thought about falling in love. If I’m honest with myself, I wanted you for all the wrong reasons. I liked how you looked. I liked the challenge of taking you from Nikki. I liked how rebel-like you were. I guess by the time I started falling for you, I should’ve realized it was too late. You were going to see through me eventually, and you weren’t going to like what you saw.”

“But you’re different now.”

I shrugged. I had changed, sure, but I hadn’t changed enough. Not yet.

“I’m a work in progress.”

“Like our friendship?” He said this with a hopeful tone.

I looked at him and nodded giving him an assuring smile. “Yeah. Like that.”

We looked at each other for a moment longer, the trees rustling and creating a symphony of leaves that were exactly the shade of green that they needed to be to create a living masterpiece around us. I moved to stand between his legs and wrapped my arms around his waist, resting my head on his chest. He hugged me back and I no longer felt a desire to cry.

I was a vine green, a dark, vibrant splash of color that stood out even amongst the most ostentatious of ripe red tomatoes. Nikki was the green of a brand new leaf on a spring tree ready for its first taste of raindrops and sunshine. I genuinely felt happy for the both of them and for myself as well.

When I pulled away, I realized that I was still wearing the D & N pendant around my neck. It had never occurred to me to take it off. I never thought I would have to. I reached behind my neck to unclasp the necklace then held it in my hand, looking at how pretty the letters sparkled off the platinum.

“You know,” I said to him, “Trace has a gun that he keeps in his office. He’s never used it. He doesn’t even really believe in them, but on the day that his wife and daughter were killed by that drunk driver, he went out and got one for the sole purpose of finding that guy and killing him.”

I looked up from the pendant to see that Diego was looking at me with interest. So I continued the story.

“He was so angry and so mad at the world. And after the driver, he wanted to kill himself. Papi talked some sense into him before he could do either, and now Trace keeps the gun as a reminder of what he had almost done. He doesn’t have bullets for it. He’ll never use it. But it’s always a reminder of how he still has some control left over his life, even if he had no

control over losing the two people he most loved.” I closed my hand around the pendant. “I think I’m going to hold onto this,” I said, “if you don’t mind.”

“I don’t mind,” Diego said.

He reached out to pull me into another big hug once more.

Nikki

“I bet they’re like totally making out right now,” I said as I turned onto Elvis’s street to drop him off.

“I don’t think so,” Elvis said.

“Yeah right. Did you see how he was looking at her? Talk about an awesome birthday present for her. I mean, I’m happy for her, I am, but...”

“But?”

I sighed and pulled into his driveway. “Nothing. So are you ready to tell your mom the big news?”

“I’m scared to,” Elvis said with a chuckle as he unclicked his seatbelt. He opened the car door then looked at me and reached over and took my hand, which was weird because I don’t think Elvis had ever done that before. “Nikki, I know you want to hate Nelli, but she’s a product of her environment. We all are. But she’s trying. Whether you want to believe her or not, you might want to consider this. The Nelli that gave my demo to her dad? That was pre-L.A. Nelli. I think she’s about to discover that there’s always been more to her than she ever knew, and that might not be a bad lesson for all of us to learn.”

I wanted to say something mean to him. I wanted to yell at him to stop defending Nelli, but I heard him loud and clear. Kind of. I wasn’t sure why I had to learn that lesson, but I nodded and squeezed his hand, then wished him luck as he went inside to tell his mother the big news.

I drove home trying to think about what Elvis had said, but all I kept doing was visualizing Nelli and Diego making out in her car at Vizcaya. I needed to focus big time.

I got home and changed into my shorts and tank top then headed to the fridge to find some proper junk food. The food at Nelli’s birthday had been good, but it had been posh and healthful. Sometimes all a girl wanted was a big slice of cold, leftover, pepperoni pizza, especially when she couldn’t stop thinking about her ex making out with his girlfriend. I slammed the fridge

door shut and let out a scream. Well it sounded more like a screech. I was hopeless.

The doorbell rang and I stared at it as if it was going to open by itself. Not knowing who it could be, I tip toed over and checked the peep hole and saw Diego standing outside. What was he doing here?

“What are you doing here?” I said once I had opened the door.

“I wanted to talk to you.” He came inside and I closed the door thinking it was strange that he was visiting. Who made out with their girlfriend on her birthday and then came over to visit his ex?

“Is everything alright?”

“I think so,” Diego said. He walked to the kitchen, probably knowing it’s where I felt most comfortable. He seemed a little nervous, but he also seemed to have a purpose. “Mind if I get a soda?”

“No go ahead,” I told him. I crossed my arms and leaned against the counter as I looked at him. I watched him drink some of his soda before he looked right at me. And then I realized the obvious. I knew why he had come over, and my stomach dropped. He didn’t have to do this, and I was going to stop him before he did.

“Diego, I know. You don’t have to tell me. I get it. You chose her. I saw how you looked at her at Vizcaya, and trust me, I’m okay with it. I knew you would anyway. She like came back from LA with this new attitude, and demeanor, and you probably like her even more for it, which is cool. I mean, even I’m willing to cut her more slack and maybe hang out with...”

I was shut up by the touch of his lips to mine and his warm fingers touching the back of my neck. He smelled like the heat coming off the sand at the beach, and I put my hand on his back to hold him closer to me. I didn’t even allow my mind to be confused. I just let him kiss me as I kissed him back, and when he did stop he looked at me with playful blue eyes and said, “I chose you, Nikki. I chose you a long time ago. I just forgot. But I remember now, and I’ll never forget again.”

That sounded amazing. That sounded perfect. My eyes got so watery and I barely made out the object he pulled out of his pants pocket at that moment. He handed me the heart charm with the D + N on it. The charm looked a little worse for wear like it had gone through a whole life of its own. It had lost most of its shine, but the inscription was as deep as ever.

I covered my mouth with my other hand and blinked several times as a few strong tears escaped. Take that, Nelli! He had chosen me after all. I

somehow won over his biggest inspiration, and then I paused as I thought about that.

I think she's about to discover that there's always been more to her than she ever knew, and that might not be a bad lesson for all of us to learn.

Elvis' words flew into my head all of a sudden, as if they wanted me to really understand what he was saying. I was a bad person for feeling victorious over Nelli. Sure she had started this mess by going after my boyfriend. Gosh that sounded nice. My boyfriend. But Nelli had started it! Okay, sure, Elvis was right. There was more to Nelli than she knew. And the fact that Diego had chosen my pragmatism over Nelli's inspirational "being" proved that there was more to him than he ever knew.

"Are you okay?" Diego looked at me concerned. I sniffled and pulled away from him, walking around to the other side of the counter as I still clutched the pendant.

Elvis wouldn't have cautioned me if his words hadn't been meant for me in the first place. I started crying more at that moment because I knew what Elvis had truly been telling me with his statement. He hadn't told me that because he wanted me to be nicer to Nelli or to really take her new ways into consideration. He wanted me to learn my lesson too. I took a deep breath so I could speak without crying.

"You're right," I began. "You did choose me. But you're also right when you say you forgot. You forgot for a little bit too long. That Nikki and this Nikki are two different people too. That Nikki loved you so much that she would do anything for you. But this Nikki, this Nikki loves herself too. You hurt me so bad, Diego. I never was able to get over you, so I just kept torturing myself and making myself believe that I was the problem, but it never was me. I was so naïve to think that me not inspiring you was the tell-tale sign, but it wasn't. I didn't need to inspire your artwork because I was real, and you had me already. All of me. No, the tell-tale sign that you didn't feel about me the way that I felt about you, was the fact that you were always so safe with me. You never argued with me, or told me that I was wrong. You accepted everything I said, as if I had all the answers. You depended on me, but you never offered me criticism or advice. You never challenged me or pushed me to be more than I was. You were happy with me being who I was because that was good enough for you. But if you had cared about me, the way I cared about you, you would've pushed me more, and told me when I was acting crazy, or even pushing you too hard."

“You wanted me to be Elvis,” Diego said. His voice sounded dry and he coughed.

“Elvis loves me. Like, the way I love you. And if I were to go to his house right now and start this very same conversation, I would be you, and he would be me, and that’s how I know, because as much as I can’t imagine my life without Elvis, I couldn’t see myself ever being in love with Elvis.”

“But I am in love with you,” Diego said coming around to where I was standing. “Nikki, you’re not the Elvis in this situation.”

“Maybe not now, but I was before, and I just...I don’t want to, Diego. I don’t want to go back down this road with you, knowing where it might inevitably end up. Maybe things will change. Maybe we’ll hang out and in a few months I’ll believe you, or maybe you’ll believe yourself when you say it, but right now I just need to focus on me. Just me. It’s my turn to be selfish. Let me have that.” I held out the pendant for him to take and he stared at me as if he had been punched in the gut.

It took him a moment, but he did take the pendant. He looked it over, shook his head, and then pocketed it once more.

“This hurts, Nikki,” he said as his voice quivered.

I held my tears back. I was done crying for myself and Diego. “Maybe that’s a good sign,” I said.

He blinked, then nodded and took a deep breath. He took two big steps forward and pulled me into a hug. I gave him that. I hugged him tight, and then he left. And once again I was alone in my home, for once not thinking about how I had lost Diego, but about how Diego had lost me.

I opened the refrigerator, sure that the cold pizza inside would help me deal with my emotions, but then the doorbell rang again. I took a deep breath and swallowed several times before I opened it. Diego stood there as if we hadn’t just finished saying our silent good-byes.

“I just thought you should know,” he said, “that I’m going to keep doing this. I’m going to keep showing up to your house, and bothering you in school, and showing up on time, and asking you for help in that honors economics class I’m taking so we have a class together. And you’re not going to be able to avoid me, and I’m going to prove to you that I do want you, just as much as you want me. So yeah.”

I didn’t want to smile, but my face didn’t get the memo because I smiled anyway.

“Diego...”

“I love you, Nikki. And when you finally believe me, you have to promise to take me back. Deal?”

“I’m not making any promises.”

“I’ll take that for now,” he conceded. “Don’t be surprised if I show up to school before you tomorrow. I set five alarms. Good night, Nik.”

I shook my head amused. “Good night, Diego.”

He smiled and left again, and I closed the door and leaned back against it with the hugest smile on my face. It felt nice to know someone wanted to go through all that trouble just to get me back. I felt elated and wanted to hop around the living room, but I just stood there and thought again about how even though our love story had fallen apart, maybe now it could begin again.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Lina Rivera graduated with a B.A. in Creative Writing from the University of Southern California. *Vizcaya* is her first novel. She currently lives in Silver Spring, Maryland with two roommates and their two cats.

